

NOVEL

8

THE Strange
Adventure of A Broke
MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi



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**“To be honest...
Err, well, you see.
How should
I put this?
Ahem...”**

Lapis grew increasingly incoherent. *Well, it's personal. Maybe she doesn't want to lay it all out,* Loren thought. But after a while spent grunting and groaning, Lapis finally found her resolve. She cast her eyes down and muttered,

**“It's as good
a time as any.
I thought
I might...
introduce you
to my parents.”**



With some familiar
faces in tow,
they march on to
**DEMON
TERRITORY!**



It was a man around the same height as Loren. His build was slightly slimmer, but seeing as he'd single-handedly blocked a reinforced strike, he was plainly stronger than he appeared.

“What’s wrong?
Is that it?”

THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY

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WRITTEN BY

Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi



Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 8

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Fantasie Geschichte von
Söldner in großer Armut

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

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Prologue:

Down to Business

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—a certain adventurer’s finances, wiped out.

Hey, they’re not completely wiped out, Loren thought as he tossed the cloth sack that was the source of these rumors onto the table. It was most certainly lighter than it had once been.

It all came back to his comrade Gula, who (though this could not be said in public) just so happened to have once been called the dark god of gluttony. It had started with an ominous statement.

“Come to think of it, Loren,” she’d said, “didn’t you say you’d treat me to *something nice* in Kaffa?”

A part of Loren found her rather shameless.

This promise had been made during their previous job. That job had ultimately been a success, though their work had been impeded by one of Gula’s old friends—the dark god of greed, Mammon, a powerful entity with the appearance of a young boy. Loren had managed to drive him into a corner.

With the threat nearly vanquished, Gula had pleaded for the boy’s life, and Mammon himself had seemed repentant, so Loren had put the battle on hold and entrusted the kid to Gula. Surely, Gula should have felt at least a little indebted to him after that. But according to her, the meal and the debt were entirely separate matters.

“Don’t you get weaker when you’re full? How about fasting a bit?”

“Hey, don’t be so heartless. It shouldn’t be a problem if I’m a bit weaker, right? It’s not like we’ll be running into my brethren left and right.”

The moment she said that, Loren was overcome with a terrible feeling that a new dark god was due to pop up at any second. In any case, Gula insisted she had to eat something nice and wouldn’t take no for an answer. After much persuading, Loren gave in to treating her.

The “something nice” Loren chose was a restaurant just a little on the pricier end of the spectrum. For the first time in a long while, he savored expensive wine as Gula proceeded to bring honor to her gluttonous title. She ordered dish after dish—until the restaurant’s larder was emptied of ingredients.

The establishment was already pricy, so when Gula plowed through absolutely everything, the tab naturally cost a pretty penny. That wasn’t the end of it either. Word had traveled about a beautiful woman who endlessly scarfed down food like there was no tomorrow, and people had gathered to watch this most curious spectacle. Thus, the rumor.

“What did you think would happen?”

Loren shrugged as he sipped cheap swill in the dim adventurers’ guild bar.

The question had been eloquently posed by the woman clad in priest vestments across the table, who looked genuinely astounded. She hailed from the demon race—which didn’t boast the best relationship with humanity—but she still clung to a degree of common sense, and therefore couldn’t understand why Loren had gone along with Gula’s binge eating when he was so short on funds to begin with.

“I’m not in the red yet, so what’s the problem?” Loren asked.

“Well, I imagine you ran through nearly all your reward from our last job.”

Lapis pinched up the sack Loren had cast onto the table and peered inside. She didn’t hear any coins jostling when she picked it up, so she didn’t expect much. However, the first thing to catch her eye was a certain glint. A single gold coin remained.

“Looks like you still have *some* leeway.”

“Don’t you dare tell Gula. If she extorts any more of it, it’s my life on the line.”

Gula wasn’t around at the moment. Given the hour, she was likely asleep at the same inn Loren usually frequented—albeit in her own room. In fact, Loren wasn’t generally up and about drinking at this time either. He had only come to answer Lapis’s summons.

At first, Loren was certain she had called him solely to complain about his

lapse in Gula-related judgment, which had taken him several days prior. But after Lapis pulled the sack tight and returned it, she seemed to entirely lose interest in the matter. “Well, we’re not here to discuss that.”

“Really? I thought you’d scold me a little more.”

“I don’t really have much to say about what you do with your own wallet... Oh, would you like to put that last coin toward paying your debt to me, though?”

“I lose that, and I’ll be camping on the streets.”

Still, Loren owed it to her, and if Lapis was sincerely asking for it, it only made sense to oblige. *There’s no way around it*, he thought as he picked up his fortune and handed it to her, cloth sack and all.

Yet Lapis pushed the sack back toward him. “How could I possibly accept after hearing that?”

“It wouldn’t bother me.”

“It’s fine. Let’s just say you’ll return on my investment later. Please use it on your own food and shelter.”

Any borrower would be glad to see their lender shrug off the issue of repayment. However, Loren’s debt to Lapis was by now little more than pretense. At this point it was difficult to tell whether either side was serious when it came to the question of borrowing or returning.

“Shall we get to the main point, then?”

“Go ahead. What’s all this about?”

Lapis had contacted him through the guild, and those messages cost money.

Incidentally, Loren had no idea which inn Lapis preferred. Whenever he was in Kaffa, she appeared wherever he was, seemingly out of nowhere. It was like she was always there when he needed her, and though they had been in the same party for a decent stretch now, Loren still didn’t know where she went or what she did on her idle days.

Anyway, the business had to be of critical importance if Lapis had gone to such trouble to call him over. When he pressed her, she glanced at the hilt of

his sword, which was visible over his shoulder.

“It’s about your greatsword.”

Loren glanced at the weapon. He’d just so happened to stumble upon the blade at a weapon shop in this very town, after his old sword had broken. At least, that was the official story. As truth would have it, Lapis had arranged this so-called coincidence. However, the conspiracy had been so blatant that Loren had to wonder if she was even still trying to hide this fact.

On their previous job, Loren’s sword had been destroyed by the dark god of greed, Mammon, only to reveal another sword within it. The abnormal cutting edge of this new blade was what had allowed him to defeat Mammon.

“The way I see it, it is far too dangerous to continue using something of unknown origin,” said Lapis.

“I’d agree with you... But how serious are you when you say you don’t know where this thing came from?”

“I am entirely serious. Is there something wrong with that?”

Loren shook his head. He didn’t know how to reply to that.

He was aware that some matters required two distinct stances—public and private. However, if that was the case here, he wished she’d put a bit more effort into making sure he remained on one side or the other.

Regardless. Lapis seemed to want to keep it this way, and Loren didn’t want to complicate the situation any further.

“I’m just talking to myself here, but I really don’t know anything about it,” Lapis audibly whispered as she removed her eyes from Loren. “It’s not like anyone actually explained its backstory to me. It’s just one of the random items I snagged from the old storehouse and stuffed away.”

This reeked of danger and criminal activity. Loren inadvertently set his cup on the table before he could take another sip. “This thing came from your hometown?”

It sounded that way, at least. That alone made it considerably more dangerous.

It wasn't as if Loren had faced any problems while wielding the blade, so he did trust the story to a degree. However, Lapis irrefutably hailed from the land of demons, and learning that this weapon had come from a demon's storehouse escalated his sense of impending crisis ten-fold.

"Please don't pose questions when I'm talking to myself. It makes it sound like you're eavesdropping," Lapis sullenly said, with her head turned away.

As far as Loren was concerned, this was a matter of life or death. Joke time was over. "That's not the problem here. Ain't that dangerous as all hell?!"

"My home is not a bunker full of hazardous material!"

"Well, I guess...it *might* not be."

Even if the location in question was a demon's storehouse, it was perhaps a bit rude to automatically designate it as dangerous without specific reason. Not to mention it was the home of the woman who had accompanied him on so many adventures. Loren reconsidered the matter.

She wouldn't just hand over something life-threatening without doing at least a little research, he thought. Then he realized Lapis's eyes were wandering down a questionable path.

"Lapis?"

"Y-yes, well... It certainly isn't that I thought my claims were in some way unfounded, but... I-I did properly inspect it... Err, I mean, there's no way something so dangerous would just be lying around in some random weapon shop."

"But it wasn't lying around in some shop, was it?"

"That's not the issue. Umm, how should I put this..."

She *could* just come out and say it was originally hers. Loren couldn't help but wonder why she was going to such lengths to conceal that fact. Lapis spent a while racking her brain, trying to figure out how to lead the conversation. When she finally reached a conclusion, she resumed speaking while looking straight at Loren.

"I guarantee that there were no issues while it was encased in magium."

Rather, I didn't know there was anything inside. Now I haven't the slightest idea as to its condition."

"So you admit it came from you?"

"I am only speaking to our present predicament. I've not said a word regarding its past circumstances."

Her justification was rather forceful, but pushing back wouldn't accomplish much. Loren decided to go along.

"Fine, we'll leave it at that. So what's the plan?"

If even the supplier had no idea what was up, what were they supposed to do?

Lapis's answer came out sounding incredibly half-hearted. "I believe we will have to ask someone who *does* know."

"And who would that be?"

The sword seemed beyond the know-how of your average adventurer or appraiser. Lapis herself could already conduct rather precise appraisals, and even she considered this a hopeless endeavor. If anyone possessed detailed information on the sword, it would therefore have to be its original owner.

Once Loren's thoughts reached the point, he realized what Lapis was about to say. He stared long and hard at her face. "Don't tell me..."

She leaned across the table, directing a barely audible whisper at his startled face. "Yes, if we want to clear this up, we must ask its owner... Or rather... How to put this... As far as I am aware, there is only one person who might know more about that sword than me."

Then came the call to action. "I'm asking if you will accompany me home, Mr. Loren."

In that moment, Loren had no idea how to answer. Lapis stared at him in all seriousness, and he could only stare back at her.

Chapter 1:

Desertion to Explanation

DAWN HAD YET TO BREAK when a figure clad from head to toe in a gray cloak appeared at Kaffa's gate. Their cloak obscured their face and gender, but they boasted quite a large build. They had walked rather quickly down the city streets, occasionally scanning the area, and overall coming off as incredibly suspicious.

Since they were headed outside the city walls, they couldn't have been up to anything too nefarious, but their behavior still put the gatekeepers just a touch on guard. Then another figure appeared behind the first one, capturing the gray cloak in a firm grip.

"Where do you think you're going, Mr. Loren?" asked a young woman in white priest vestments, a sweet smile plastered on her face.

This was Lapis, whom the soldiers had seen several times before. That meant the one in the cloak was likely her partner: the adventurer known as Loren.



“Leaving town so early in the morning... Are you trying to abandon your post?”

“That’s... Well, about that.”

Loren stumbled over his words as Lapis ripped off his cloak. Underneath, he wore his typical attire, though for some reason, his usual sword was absent from his back.

Upon seeing this, Lapis narrowed her eyes. She seized the back of Loren’s belt and began dragging him away.

“Ah, wait. Hey!”

“To be honest, I’m a little disappointed in you, Mr. Loren. But don’t worry, I forgive you. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to disappear for good. I just thought I’d lay low for a bit and wait for the heat to die down...”

“I can’t bear to hear it. Now let’s get going already. We’ll have a good discussion over breakfast.”

A smallish woman dragging off a giant of a man wasn’t an everyday sight. The gatekeepers watched the pair until they were gone, then exchanged looks.

Meanwhile, Lapis had taken Loren all the way to the adventurers’ guild. It would be rather troublesome if he managed to escape, after all. Only when Loren was standing at the entrance did he finally give in and begin walking on his own two feet. Lapis crossed the threshold at his side, then accompanied him to his usual corner of the bar area.

The waitress was at their table almost immediately. Lapis placed an order for two and paid in exact change, then sat across from Loren with a fixed glare.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving the party or anything.” Even Loren knew it sounded like an excuse, but he felt like he had to say it anyway.

Lapis nodded. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“But you know... Our destination this time...”

The day before, Lapis had asked Loren to accompany her to her hometown. It

didn't sound like a big deal, but the problem lay in where exactly Lapis's hometown was located.

Though Lapis's outward appearance was that of an ordinary human priest, she was, in truth, far more powerful than any human. As a matter of fact, she belonged to the much-hated demon race. Lapis's hometown was, consequently, in the land of demons, which lay beyond the mountain range at the center of the continent. Accompanying her there would mean crossing into that fell land.

Even Loren had to think twice about that one.

Indeed, after thinking about it, he had apparently concluded that his best bet would be to hide until this had all blown over. He had left his sword behind, thinking Lapis might send the enigmatic artifact back home for analysis.

Incidentally, while there existed no detailed maps of the continent, the common wisdom was that it consisted of two concentric circles. The outer circle was bordered by the ocean. The inner circle was a mountain range at the center, which they would have to cross. And within that circle lay demon country.

"Are you getting cold feet?" Lapis's anger subsided somewhat at Loren's reaction. If anything, she sounded sad. "I thought someone of your caliber would accompany me without a second thought, Mr. Loren."

"Let's be reasonable. I may be an uneducated merc, but you know... Ever since I was a brat, my troop never missed a chance to hammer terrifying tales of demons into my head."

Demonkind were quite infamous.

The most notable individual was known as the "demon lord." Tales of this lord smacked of exaggeration, however, and Loren had no idea where embellishments gave way to truth. So he tried not to think about that one.

Even discounting the demon lord, though, there were tales of single demons bringing countries to ruin, or leading great heroes to their downfall, or laying waste to great swathes of the continent purely for the sake of their own research. There were too many of these terrible tales to count. Mind you, Loren had worked with Lapis long enough to have his doubts about their veracity, but

he wasn't exactly motivated to assume they were all made up.

"I'll be upfront here," he said. "I can't shake the feeling that this is nothing but trouble."

"So it isn't because you're scared. I don't know whether to be happy or sad about that, honestly."

"I've already got my hands full with you, Lapis."

"Am I really that much trouble?" Lapis stared at him, not fully convinced.

Thinking over her question in earnest, Loren cocked his head. She had a point. While he had recently been in quite a few terrible predicaments, they had never been directly because of Lapis. Perhaps she wasn't as bad as he thought.

"Admittedly, I may or may not have plotted to...increase your debt a handful of times," she said.

"That's...not great, but let's just forget about it." Loren accepted that his own self-destructive nature was equally to blame for his running tab. Especially when he did things like agree to treat Gula to a meal.

"The road might be a bit dangerous, but I will guarantee your safety once we're there. Are you still opposed to joining me?"

"I'm wondering how far I should take you at your word on that one."

Demons generally looked down on humankind. This was, perhaps, inevitable given the blatant gap in the race's abilities. Even disregarding this, Loren simply couldn't believe that a human could just wander into demon territory without consequence.

What if someone picked a fight with him, claiming he was an inferior race? Or maybe he'd be mistreated, as that was what lowly humans deserved. He could picture either scenario vividly and wanted no part in such things.

"Do I really have to go? What are we gonna do about Gula, then?"

Lapis scowled a bit at the mention of their presently absent third party member. "In regards to Gula... I get the feeling she could pass as a demon if she cared to."

Loren didn't quite know how she had done it, but Gula had changed her eye color to operate incognito in Kaffa. Her true eye color, however, was purple—just like Lapis's.

Rule of thumb, any being with purple eyes you happened to meet in the world was a demon. Moreover, even if they concealed her dark god powers, she obviously possessed abilities that far surpassed those of humankind. It wouldn't sound even a little far-fetched to claim she was a demon.

"I also have a bit of personal business at home... And I want you to be there with me, Mr. Loren."

"Personal business?"

This sudden new facet to the journey piqued Loren's interest, all the more given that she specifically wanted him along for the ride. If going to the demon country would help Lapis settle some personal matters, he was happy to go, even if it meant a degree of difficulty for himself. He owed her that much at least.

"To be honest... Err, well, you see. How should I put this? Ahem..." Lapis grew increasingly incoherent.

Well, it's personal. Maybe she doesn't want to lay it all out, Loren thought.

But after a while spent grunting and groaning, Lapis finally found her resolve. She cast her eyes down and muttered, "It's as good a time as any. I thought I might...introduce you to my parents."

It was Loren's turn to be taken aback. Demon customs were beyond his ken, but in terms of human customs, this was the kind of thing people only did when they enjoyed a very close relationship. To be precise, the kind where someone was introducing a person she wanted to be with—or had already agreed to be with.

Loren had absolutely no idea what to say to that. Lapis frantically waved a hand in front of her chest, her words speeding from her lips. "Of course, if you think this is too bothersome, we can forget about it. If you really insist, I can go home on my own, but... What do you think?" she asked him with smiling eyes.

Even Loren couldn't flat-out deny her when she put it like that.

Loren had no way of knowing how much thought Lapis was putting into this request to introduce him to her parents. But if she was serious, she deserved a serious response. “Your old man’s not going to say, ‘I’m not giving my daughter to a lowly human,’ and fight me, is he?”

“I-I don’t mean it like that... That sort of thing should come *after* we get to know each other a bit better. And after we have come to a proper understanding on the matter. But we *have* helped one another out of some tough spots. And you did contribute a great deal to the recovery of my arms, Mr. Loren...”

It was somewhat impressive how smoothly she could string words together given her evident panic. Loren looked at her red face, a face pleading for his answer. After a deep breath, he said, “Fine. I have no idea how this one’s gonna pan out, but I’ll tag along for now.”

Lapis’s face lit up. She clenched a fist before her chest and forcefully proclaimed, “Then just leave it to me, Mr. Loren. Whatever transpires on the road to our destination, I will do my due diligence and mediate with all the fine ladies and gentlemen on the other end. You don’t have to worry about Father either. Mother is on my side.”

“You just said at least two things that worry me there.”

Firstly, she hadn’t denied that the path would be dangerous. Secondly, she hadn’t denied that her father was liable to react in a troublesome way once he saw Loren. However, Loren had already given his assent, and it was too late to turn back.

“Counting on you,” he resignedly grumbled. “I just want to know about the sword. I don’t want to have to risk my life.”

Despite his words, Loren just knew he was in for trouble, be it on the way or in the land of demons. But the talk was seemingly over. The waitress came with their order, and Lapis took the plates off her hands to set them on the table.

If they wanted to head to demon territory, they technically still needed the consent of their party member Gula. At least, Loren insisted that Gula needed

to be in on it.

Lapis was rather indifferent. Cold, even. But she recognized Gula as a comrade in arms and agreed that he had a point. They decided to speak with her once she dropped by the guild.

Gula hardly went anywhere besides the inn and the adventurers' guild. Her meals were almost always taken in the guild dining area, and she was sure to appear eventually if they hung about killing time. In short order, Gula arrived, right on schedule.

"Huh? You're both bright and early today. Musta been pretty hungry," Gula said when she saw the duo already seated. She placed her order on the way to the same table. "Twenty eggs, sunny-side up, with bacon. Ten sausage platters. Thirty pieces of toast—rye. And throw in three bowls of whatever vegetables you've got. Also five pitchers of milk. It's morning and all. I should keep it light."

"Y-yes, of course..."

The waitress's face was stiff as she took a hefty number of coins from Gula, then headed to inform the chef of the order. Gula saw her off with a smile, but her face began to resemble the waitress's as she turned and noticed Loren and Lapis staring at her.

"What's up?"

"I saw it coming, but that's obscene," said Loren.

"I almost lost my appetite," Lapis muttered, looking as though she was enduring heartburn.

Gula seemed unperturbed by their commentary. She watched in anticipation as the chef took the order and disappeared into the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Loren informed her of his conversation with Lapis and explained that they had decided to head to demon territory.

"That so. This's got nothing to do with work, then?" Gula asked. However, she voiced no objections.

There were no guild jobs that would send them all the way to demon country. Loren was about to shake his head, but Lapis spoke before he could.

“I can make it into work,” said Lapis.

“You can?”

“Yes. You see, this kingdom is keenly interested in the situation in demon lands. As I recall, the guild sponsors a permanent quest involving a survey of demon territory.”

Any given individual could simply ignore those they hated, but nations didn’t enjoy the same luxury. As such, they needed to gather as much information on their neighbors as possible—just in case something happened, and ideally so they’d be prepared before it did.

This information gathering was generally conducted by a nation’s intelligence agency, but at times these efforts were insufficient. Adventurers were known to be tenacious and stealthy, so such jobs were sent to them as well.

“I can pick out a few relevant jobs and make it into proper work—with proper pay,” Lapis said, emphasizing the latter clause. Somehow, that insistence only made it sound like a scam to Loren. He let out a snort, and she turned to him. “What, are you dissatisfied?”

“I don’t wanna do the secret service’s job for them. Those agencies and bureaus and whatnot, I never did trust them. They stabbed me in the back a few times too many in my mercenary days.”

Loren’s negative impression of these organizations was all too understandable. The people they employed thought nothing of lying to their own allies whenever necessary. It was part of their job to collect the sort of information no one was supposed to hear, and it was hard to trust someone who did that for a living. Further, they sometimes devised plans that sacrificed measly mercenaries to preserve the country’s standing army without a second thought. In fact, every man in Loren’s mercenary company had known to exercise more caution with allied intelligence officers than with the enemy.

“I see where you’re coming from. But with the guild involved, it shouldn’t be anything too suspect.”

Mercenaries had no official backing, but adventurers were supported by a large, nation-spanning organization. Anyone who tried to cheat the guild was in

for a rough time. There would be no need for violence. The guild could simply proclaim they were pulling out of a given country, and all the adventurers who hunted bandits and monsters, who searched and excavated the local ruins, would leave with them. Land surveys would go uncondacted, and public order would fall into sharp decline.

With all these repercussions on the table, it was far more profitable for a government to dole out jobs with a lower need for confidentiality, and to handle these transactions with integrity.

“And people unable to calculate basic profit and loss just aren’t accepted into such agencies, I’d imagine.”

“Is that how it works?” Loren wondered, not seeming all that convinced. He glanced at Gula, who had completely tuned out of the conversation the moment the first wave of dishes arrived.

She was devouring her way through plates at an incredible pace, but strangely, she didn’t come off as crude. Here sat a beautiful lady with plenty of exposed skin who was working up a bit of sweat, eating in a way that made every dish look like the most delicious thing in the world. It was captivating, in a way. Whenever she ate, Gula naturally attracted the eyes of everyone around her. She was something of a magnet for other customers, and Loren had gotten to wondering if restaurants should start paying her out of their advertising budgets.

Gula looked blissful as she chewed the most recent heap of food she had shoveled into her mouth, only to notice Loren’s absentminded gaze. After hurriedly swallowing, she asked, “Hmm? What? Did I get some grease on my face or something?”

Loren shook his head, insisting it was nothing.

After a bit of thought, Gula skewered one of her remaining sausages on her fork and held it out to him. “You want a taste, then? Want it?”

“A glutton is sharing her meal. Now there’s a rarity.” At the very least, he had never imagined the dark god of gluttony relinquishing any part of her meal. He couldn’t help but crack a wry smile at this incomprehensible entity.

“Hey, this sausage ain’t your average everyday link, you know.”

“It looks pretty normal to me.”

“Well get this. The fork sticking into it’s the same fork I’ve been eating off of. It’s one of those indirect something or another,” Gula chuckled, only to stiffen as a bone-chilling aura radiated from Lapis’s direction.

“What a fascinating diversion in the middle of our conversation,” Lapis said calmly to Loren.

“Ah, sorry. Just trying to wander off into my own little world for a sec.”

Visiting the demon country and meeting Lapis’s parents—these two things were already more than enough to weigh on his mind. Adding the local intelligence agency on top of all that was making him eager for a bit of escapism.

Lapis’s mouth bent a sharp frown, and she tapped her fist against her chest. “Leave all the bothersome things to me. I’ll see you come to no harm.”

“You sure I can trust you? Not that I can do much else.”

They could always just set out without taking the quest. But if they could get a bit of extra money for their troubles, Loren couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Perhaps taking the job would even earn them a bit of backup.

“Your concerns may be warranted, Mr. Loren. But I, Lapis, shall handle that as well. I shall choose the safest quest there is,” Lapis confidently declared. And that was really all he could do.

Even if Loren’s worries were realized, he had the demon Lapis, the dark god Gula, and the highest class of undead—a girl called Scena—who slept inside his soul. These girls had no trouble physically removing any obstacles in their way, and so Loren decided to entrust the matter to Lapis.

With Loren’s consent, Lapis immediately made her way to the bulletin board in the adjoining guild area, where she engaged in a long staring match with all the sheets stuck to it. Loren and Gula waited at their seats for her to return.

“Lapis’s parents, eh? Can’t imagine how they’ll be,” Gula said, brimming with curiosity.

By contrast, Loren sounded almost entirely uninterested. “Who knows? They can’t be decent folk, not by my estimation. I mean, they’re the ones who stole Lapis’s limbs and eyes before telling her to go out and see the world. That’s the kind of thing crazy people do.”

“Yeah, but Lapis doesn’t seem too bothered by the whole thing, so maybe those folks don’t consider it all that bad.”

“That’s even worse. We’re headed to a place full of those weirdos.”

But Loren had picked up on a curious element in Gula’s phrasing. He felt like he should dig too far, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking. “You’re not a demon, are you?”

Gula was in the middle of drinking milk straight from the pitcher. She paused. “Hmm? I thought we all agreed I was a dark god.”

“Well, I get that, but there’s your eye color and all. But now you’re referring to demon-kind like they’ve got nothing to do with you. I just thought that meant you were different from them.”

Purple eyes were the sole physical trait that differentiated demons from other races. As Gula shared those same eyes, Loren had suspected she had demonic origins, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“You could say that... I guess I might tell you—if it’s ever the right moment.”

“Are you trying to sound cool? Well, if you don’t want to talk about it, I’m not gonna force you.” Loren didn’t think kindly of anyone dredging up someone else’s past. If Gula brought it up again because she felt like it, he wouldn’t mind hearing what she had to say. Otherwise, he had no intention of dragging the information out of her.

“Not exactly, but...” Gula’s hands stopped reaching for food. “Well, someday.”

Of all things, Loren sensed something like loneliness in her voice. He quickly concluded that this wasn’t a topic to delve into for mere curiosity’s sake and brought the conversation to an end.

A little while longer into their banter, Lapis returned. She held a scrap of

paper—a copy of a quest form. Evidently, she had already formally accepted it.

I can count on her to pick something reasonable, right? Loren thought.

Lapis had a spring in her step as she pulled out the seat beside him, sat, and spread the paper over the table. “It’s a straightforward survey quest. There’s a one-month time limit. The base pay is fifty silver per head, with bonuses based on the information we bring back.”

“That’s lower than I thought it’d be.”

How’s anyone supposed to brave demon territory at those discount rates? Loren wondered.

Lapis wagged her finger. “You’re so naïve, Mr. Loren. The true value of this quest is the information bonus on top of the base reward.”

Meaning they were promised *at least* fifty silver. The rest was up to their accomplishments. Again, Loren wondered if it was really worth it, only for Lapis to whisper, “They’ll pay a substantial amount if we just make it to demon territory. Even if we were to do no more than loiter at the outskirts.”

According to Lapis, the guild staff could take care of the official report. Even if they didn’t come across a single demon, they would be paid enough to make up for it.

“Additionally, they specified a *maximum* time of one month. However, they did not specify a minimum.”

“So you’re saying we can go only as far as we want and immediately turn back?”

“Now you’re getting it. Of course, we still need to bring back enough information to warrant a report. However, it seems they’ll be happy if we just specify what part of demon territory we reached, even if all we have to say is that it looked peaceful.”

The town of Kaffa lay in the southwestern region of the continent. They were some distance from the center of the continent, so the quest wasn’t as lucrative as it would be in a town closer to the central regions. From one of those, it wouldn’t take much time at all to reach the mountain range, and so in those

parts, this quest was seen as short work for reliable pay.

“How’re we supposed to prove we made it to demon territory?”

There had to be some requirement, or some people wouldn’t even go. They’d just kill a bit of time and come back to issue a baseless report. Then, because the guild couldn’t guarantee the report’s authenticity, there’d be no point in posting the quest in the first place.

“They lend out an enchanted brooch to all takers. Every so often, the brooch will send out a signal indicating our location. The guild tracks the signal on their own enchanted artifact, so they can tell how far we go.” Lapis pointed at her chest—at a brooch that gave off a blue glimmer. “I will look after it. The penalty fee for losing it is apparently outrageous.”

They didn’t know how often their location would be recorded, but with this setup, it would be easy to prove that they’d reached their destination.

“So if I’m understanding right, it’s a lucrative job for any adventurer skilled enough to cross the mountains?” Gula asked.

Lapis nodded.

Loren asked, “Aren’t those mountains supposed to be dangerous, though?”

It would also be dangerous to infiltrate demon territory, but he hadn’t heard anything good about the mountain range they’d have to cross to get there either.

“It’s relatively safe,” Lapis answered. “Relative to demon territory, I mean. The main problem lies with the mountains themselves. The path through requires several rather high climbs. It’s not actually that far, distance-wise, but traveling through the mountains unprepared is a death sentence.”

The passes near the summits were coated in ice and snow all year round. According to Lapis, even those equipped with proper mountaineering gear often lost their lives trying to scale them. Among the demons, it was said that the mountains were so high it was impossible to cross them even on a dragon’s back.

“Then how are we supposed to get there?” Loren sounded tired before the

journey had even begun.

“If we can’t go over them, we just have to go below,” Lapis replied as if it were nothing. “Though it’s more straight *through* the range than below it. Those mountains have always been famous for the high-quality ore that can be mined from them. The dwarves have dug shafts all over the place.”

Dwarves were a demihuman race whose fully grown adults stood at only the height of a human’s hips. They were generally hairy and muscular, and were the most skilled race when it came to dealing with dirt, stones, and metals.

A few rare dwarves lived in human-controlled territories, where the quality and beauty of their crafted gear and accessories earned them their fortunes. It was typical for dwarves to excavate the materials they used with their own hands. The moment they got a whiff of quality ore, they would set off to pepper the mountainside with holes. In remote, inhabitable regions, this was fine. But dwarves occasionally ruined the landscape of human nobles’ estates, and were consequently tried as criminals. From the dwarves’ point of view, all ore was a blessing from the earth and rightly belonged to no one. This view was, to say the least, unpopular among humankind.

As such, the range that isolated the demons from the rest of the world could be considered the dwarven motherload. Those mountains belonged to no nations, and so the dwarves could dig however much they wanted.

“It was quite terrible, once upon a time. You see, dwarves are hard workers who are only interested in work and drink. They were digging all over, night and day...”

The harsh mountain environment was too great for humans to bear, but it was nothing against a dwarf’s natural sturdiness and perseverance. Even if they dug too far and caused a cave-in, they had the tenacity to survive. Gradually, they had continued to expand their territory.

“A good number of tunnels have been closed, but you can still find dwarf-held lands dotting the region.”

Certain dwarf settlements collected a toll to allow adventurers into demon territory. This wasn’t just a one-way service either.

“I made use of their services to come here.”

“So they let demons through too?”

“They’ll even carry your bags if you pay the fee.”

Lapis here admitted that she had secretly taken a considerable number of items from her parents on her way out the door. She considered this her reserve fund.

Ain’t that just thievery? Loren wanted to retort—but he held it in and let her go on.

As the story went, Lapis had barely managed to carry everything herself, making several round trips, but she’d ultimately grown tired before she was all the way to the end. She had gone to great lengths to acquire these items, yes, but it was pointless to keep them if they couldn’t be carried. But just as she was considering abandoning part of her cargo, she came across a certain band of dwarves. The dwarves listened to her story, and in exchange for a few of the items, agreed to carry the rest to human territory for her.

“I am deeply indebted to them. It would have been far too much for me to handle on my own.”

“Just how much did you steal from your folks?”

Lapis tried to hide her physical prowess, but she was far stronger than she appeared. Loren couldn’t imagine how much she’d have to swipe for her to nearly give up on carrying it all.

“Don’t call it *stealing*. It’s not like I’ve been disinherited, and so the house’s contents are mine to liquidate for travel funds. Plain and simple.”

“Without family permission?”

“I am part of the family.”

Lapis’s argument didn’t sit right with Loren, but perhaps this was just demon psychology. He opted not to pry.

“So we’re going through a dwarf tunnel?” Gula skillfully changed the topic.

“We could,” Lapis said with a conflicted face. “But the toll is incredibly high.”

The dwarven tunnels were practically the only safe route to demon territory. With so few alternatives, their owners could easily take advantage of travelers. Additionally, these travelers were infrequent, so the fee needed to be high to make it worth the dwarves' while.

"They took quite a bit from me. If the amount was that high for one person, then we'll need to be prepared for an outrageous sum for three."

"Won't the cost exceed the reward, then?"

"Perhaps. That's why normal adventurers use the abandoned shafts that the dwarves don't manage. Although it's far more dangerous."

Mines were abandoned once their veins were depleted, but that didn't mean the holes were filled in. They were simply left in the hands of the gods. A few shafts pierced straight through the mountains—all the way through, which meant adventurers could use these to reach the lands beyond.

However, these mines had degraded over time and were liable to cave in. But they had still been dug by dwarven hands, and so collapse was rare. The real danger lay in the fact that they had been abandoned, and that travelers were few and far between. Over many long months and years, they had become the haunt of all manner of monsters.

"The dwarves made a home out of those tunnels. I'm sure they're quite comfortable to travel along."

"So that's the danger you were talking about?"

"Indeed. Thus, we have two options: we can either pay to use a dwarf-run tunnel or take a dangerous, abandoned shaft for free."

The toll would be a trial for Loren's nearly empty pockets. Lapis had paid for her one-way ticket, but if she thought the cost was exorbitant, then it certainly was. Fifty silver per person would certainly not cover the costs.

However, Loren also wanted to avoid knowingly wading straight into dangerous waters—especially when it was due to consideration for his finances. Losing his life for lack of money struck him as beyond stupid.

On the other hand, although a part of him figured either way would be fine,

since he had Lapis and Gula on his side, he also felt he shouldn't grow too dependent.

Lapis watched Loren mull over the matter. She realized he was struggling to find a response and said, "We can decide which path we'll take once we get there. If the abandoned mines seem safe, we can head that way. If that won't work out, we can see what the dwarves have to say."

"You have ways to contact them?"

"Of course," Lapis said with a cheerful smile. "Just leave it to me."

For the time being, Loren agreed to shelve the issue. Lapis had a point—he didn't have to make a decision on the spot.

"All right, then let's start by heading to those mountains. We can think over it along the way."

"Then I'll have to prepare a wagon, equipment, and supplies."

"We'll need to buy some food stores." Gula stood, humming a tune, already fantasizing about what she would purchase this time before Lapis interrupted her daydreams.

"We're only bringing the bare essentials, okay?" she said sternly.

The glutton's face took a miserable turn but went largely ignored. It was time to prepare for a dangerous sojourn.

Chapter 2: Off to the Road

THE DAY AFTER that discussion in the guild bar, they set off from the town of Kaffa. They had acquired food and medical supplies, as well as a rented wagon and a horse to carry them, seeing as they were going a fair distance.

The journey would take them from the southwestern Kingdom of Waargenburg all the way to the center of the continent. Even a one-way trip was a terribly long stretch.

“Hm? It isn’t that bad,” said Lapis to Loren’s dispirited muttering. She looked at him as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

Meanwhile, Gula wasn’t paying the least bit of attention. She was carrying a bag over her shoulder, filled with the goods she had purchased from food stalls on their way out of town, and she was hard at work ferrying that haul into her mouth.

“It’s not?” Loren asked.

“Oh, I do believe it would take a few days to reach the mountains if we went about it normally. It would depend on the road condition, but it would take seven to eight.”

The quest they had accepted was due in thirty days’ time. If Lapis was right, travel would take up fifteen of those easy. Considering how long it would take to cross the mountains, that left them hardly any time in demon territory.

“Perhaps that would be fine for people ambling along at their own pace. Those that are serious about this job keep their luggage to a minimum and have the horse gallop the whole way. If they switched out horses at every opportunity, they could reach the mountains in around four days.”

“What about us, then?”

They weren’t in any particular hurry, but they wouldn’t be paid if they deviated too far from the schedule. Though the reward wasn’t their main

objective, the journey alone would cost a good amount. Understandably, Loren wanted to recover what he could.

“First, we will head north for three days. That’s where we’ll find our destination. We’ll be at the mountains right after that.”

“I didn’t follow a word of what you just said.”

Given Waargenburg’s location, anyone could see that they would need to head east *as well as* north. Yet Lapis failed to mention anything of the sort. Loren didn’t mind an alternative route, but he didn’t see how she expected to arrive anywhere they meant to in a mere three days.

“Though I guess it must be true, since it’s coming from you.”

“Of course. Just leave it to me.”

Lapis sounded so full of confidence that Loren quit questioning it. Surely there was something to her certainty, something a former mercenary couldn’t even imagine. Thus, it was pointless to waste any more brainpower thinking about it.

The journey north was shockingly uneventful. Having expected to run across monsters or bandits or...well, anything hostile at all, Loren felt let down by the end of it. Not a soul had dared to threaten their safe passage.

Though no one said anything about it, Gula’s presence presumably played a large part in that.

Gula was lazily sprawled out in the wagon all day long, but so long as she made no attempts to conceal her menacing aura, weaker monsters steered well clear of her. It was possible that a stronger one might rear its head, taking her as a challenge. However, strong monsters also tended to be smarter, and they’d never regard such a clearly mighty presence as prey.

As for the bandits, perhaps they sensed how dangerous the party truly was. Or perhaps it was plain good luck.

“Come to think of it, we’re gonna cross the northern border at this rate. How’s that work out?” Loren asked.

“It is relatively easy for adventurers to cross national borders. Just present your ID at the checkpoint.”

The ease spoke to the sheer size of the adventurers' guild. Identification tags from a massive organization, whose influence reached a majority of the continent, were far more trustworthy than anything anyone else could issue. Heading due north along the main roads meant passing through several checkpoints, but as Lapis said, the guild IDs let them pass with hardly a second look.

"Isn't this a free ride for smugglers, then?"

"You might not have noticed it, Mr. Loren, but at each point, someone secretly casts the blessing known as Sense Evil."

The checkpoints varied in size but were all run by the state. The soldiers occupying them were government officers, and it seemed some were priests like Lapis. According to her, they cast blessings on all who passed through to assess their intentions. The criterion for the blessing's appraisal was somewhat vague, but it generally caught anyone who was hiding something especially vile. Anyone who triggered Sense Evil would be apprehended on the spot and interrogated for further details.

"Then why haven't you been caught yet, Lapis?" Loren asked, given all the theft and misdeeds Lapis regularly committed. Not to mention, she was a demon, a word which carried a nefarious reputation all on its own.

"I am a priest to the god of knowledge," Lapis stated plainly. "My heart is perfectly clear of sin."

"And what about Gula?"

"Dark god" sounded even worse than "demon." Even if Lapis wasn't apprehended, it didn't make sense that Gula wasn't.

"I don't have anything to feel guilty about," Gula nonchalantly replied.

"This is a scam," Loren said with a sigh. That earned him an elbow to the chest from both Lapis and Gula. However, he was protected by his jacket, which he had received from an elder vampire on a past job. This blocked enough of the damage that he was left only slightly short of breath.

And so, the party continued north. Once three days had passed, Lapis took the lead and directed them off the highway. After a while under her direction,

Loren found his entire field of view covered by a desert of pure sand.

“Didn’t know this was here.”

In all the deserts Loren knew of, the dry air was constantly pummeled by a harsh, blazing sun. Lapis’s desert, however, wasn’t especially warm even at midday. The air was dry, sure, but it was in fact rather chilly. The sand had a bluish, almost sea-like tint.

“And there’s nothing here,” Gula said.

And indeed, there was nothing. Nothing but sand, with nary a trace of humanity to be seen. Loren couldn’t tell why Lapis had brought them here.

“Yes, there certainly is nothing. Do you really not know of this place, Ms. Gula?” Lapis asked.

Gula frowned. She thought for a bit, then finally clapped her hands together. Her face seemed to light up with this flash of recollection. “Oh, now that you mention it, didn’t there used to be some sort of testin’ site around here?”

“I don’t know the specifics myself. In short, magic research was conducted here in the days of the ancient kingdom, and this unnatural desert is all that remains.”

Loren took another good look around from his seat on the wagon.

As far as he could tell, there was nothing but blue sand. It was fantastical, in a sense. Although the notion that a magic experiment could have turned such a wide area into a desert for several hundred years did frighten him somewhat.

“What an outrageous kingdom,” he mused. By his tone, it was hard to tell if he meant this in a positive or negative way.

“Well, it was a magic-driven state that had apparently bent even the laws of space-time to its whim. At present, demon-kind might seem overwhelmingly stronger than human-kind, but it used to be a closer competition.”

“And you’re a pretty outrageous race...”

This time, the negative implications were stronger—though they were more in his eyes than in his voice.

“Oh, and now you must be lumping me in with those magic-obsessed maniacs,” Lapis said, sounding a bit hurt.

Gula stepped in. “Now, now, settle down, girl. Are we crossing the desert?”

The temperature was manageable, but the air was unbearably dry. On top of that, the fine sand beneath them would swiftly capture the feet of the horse pulling their wagon, preventing them from going where they pleased.

“We need to make a bit of progress, but we don’t have to cross it.”

“So your destination is somewhere in the desert?” Loren asked. *What’s she got to do in this barren wasteland?*

Lapis folded her arms and fell into thought.

“What’s wrong?” Loren asked.

“Well, our aim isn’t exactly a location within the desert, per se. Though it is most certainly *inside* the desert.”

Why’d she have to rephrase that? Loren thought. But the moment the thought occurred to him, the horse let out a shrill neigh. Loren’s eyes darted around, trying to find what had caused it, and saw that the horse—which had proceeded onward even as the sand swallowed its feet—had now sunk all the way up to its shoulders.

“Oi, this is...”

“Quick, Loren. The horse is gonna be swallowed up!”

As the sands took the beast, it thrashed even more violently. Once devoured, there was a risk that its leads would pull the whole wagon down after it. But if they abandoned the horse, there would be no one left to pull their wagon, and they would likewise need to abandon much of their supplies.

Even if it had to be by brute force, Loren had to do something. But before he could summon any strength to his arms, Lapis placed a hand on his bicep.

“It’s quite all right. Let’s let the sands swallow us.”

“What are you saying...?”

“I’m saying that my destination is beneath the sand.”

Loren was now concerned that the desert had gotten to her head. But the temperature was so low, and the sun so not particularly strong, that it was difficult to imagine the heat had affected her.

“I’m being serious,” Lapis said. “I want to go beneath the sand.”

“And be buried alive? Aren’t we gonna suffocate?”

By and large, lifeforms couldn’t breathe in sand. If there really was someplace down beneath it, then depending on how *far* down it was, Loren was still at risk of asphyxiation.

“Mr. Loren, I think there’s something you ought to know.”

“I have a terrible feeling about this, but shoot.”

The horse was gone now. Slowly, bit by bit, the wagon was being dragged down after it. And on top of the wagon, Lapis was placing a hand on Loren’s shoulder. Her face was as serious as could be. “Knocking yourself out before suffocation will greatly increase your chances of survival.”

“How am I supposed to accomplish that, huh?!” Loren found himself screaming.

Lapis grabbed his hips before Loren could leap off. At first glance, it looked like he could shake her off in an instant, but in this test of strength, Loren wound up right back where he had started.

“It’s quite all right,” Lapis said. “Take a deep breath before your head sinks under and bear with it for a bit.”

“You’re aware I can’t hold my breath as long as you people, right?!”

“Err... I’ll do the honors of knocking you out.”

“Idiot! Let go!”

Loren struggled to break free, but he couldn’t escape Lapis’s grasp.

Gula tightened the strings of her snack sack as she watched Lapis pin Loren down. As she observed the wagon slowly vanish beneath the sands, she gave a short shrug.

Sinking into sand was not a pleasant experience. But if Loren couldn't break free, surrender was his only option. He followed Lapis's instructions, inhaling at the last second, and held his breath once he had been submerged.

He simultaneously closed his eyes. His face was consumed by a grainy texture, informing him that he was wholly engulfed.

And down he went. Down and down. Eyes shut, Loren allowed himself to sink. Even when he recognized it was getting difficult to hold his breath any longer, there was nothing he could do. He could only pray that he would soon be free, and fast.

But the speed with which he sank was by no means alacritous. Time passed, and the weight of the sand on every inch of his body made itself more and more felt. This was no longer a joke; Loren was beginning to suspect he would sink for a span that a demon could survive but a human could not.

Suffocation's a bitch, he thought.

He would faint before he reached his limit. But he would go through hell before he fainted, and that was something he wanted to avoid.

Suddenly, he could tell he was sinking faster. He had no time to think about what had happened. There was a feeling of weightlessness, then a rather harsh jolt to his behind. He heard the disgruntled sound of a horse, then the sound of the wagon wheels hitting something hard.

"You did something, didn't you, Ms. Gula?" Lapis said sullenly.

It seemed he had made it. Brushing off the sand clinging to his hair and body, Loren opened his eyes.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Gula said with a boastful air. It was clear she was playing dumb.

Lapis glared at her a bit before letting out a long breath and averting her eyes. "And here I thought I could get Mr. Loren to pass out. What a squandered opportunity."

"Hey, you don't have to put him through too much agony, do ya?"

This exchange told Loren two things. First, he had been right—the time it took

to reach their destination was unreasonable for any human to endure. Second, Gula, who sensed this, had presumably eaten the sand to increase their falling speed.

“What were you planning to do to me when I was out cold?” Loren asked.

“Do you really want to force those words from a maiden’s mouth?”

A supposed maiden shouldn’t plot things she can’t say, Loren thought. He knew there was no use saying that to Lapis, and so he diverted his attention to take in the sights.

The ceiling wasn’t far off, and it was likely designed to open and shut, as he couldn’t see the hole they must have fallen through. He was otherwise surrounded by smooth, white walls and enjoyed a full field of vision, even though he had no idea where the light was coming from.

Though the room had a decent breadth, there were absolutely no furnishings, save for a metallic double door on one of the walls.

“Are we...beneath the desert sands?”

“Yes. I presume this is a ruin from the ancient kingdom,” Lapis said as she stepped down from the wagon. Loren went down with her.

The floor seemed to be made of the same material as the walls. Hard, white, seamless.

“We’ll leave the wagon here. It’s not like we can use it while crossing the mountains.”



“What about your supplies? You want us to carry all that?”

“I have a trolley. Wait here a second.”

Before Loren could say anything further, Lapis threw open the only door in the room with reckless abandon. Loren wondered if he should follow her, but she had told him to wait. Surely it wasn't too dangerous to do so. After exchanging a look with Gula, he hunkered down on the spot.

“A ruin of the ancient kingdom under a desert, eh...” Loren muttered.

“I reckon it's part of that research facility she was talking about.”

“Why's it down here, then?”

“Well, it probably didn't start out that way. It probably got buried,” Gula explained as she slouched against the wagon. “Just goes to show. You can build the most advanced magic civilization in the world, and you can still go forgotten by time.”

“We wouldn't be saying that if they were still around, though.”

As Loren heard it, the ancient kingdom had been a prosperous nation that could accomplish anything by means of the arcane. Even if a single failure had turned an entire region into a desert, they would continue their research into whatever had caused it. He suspected they could even have returned the desert to its original state if they'd tried, and easily at that.

“I dunno about that. Was the ancient kingdom really all it was cracked up to be?”

“Don't ask me. You were there, weren't you?”

“Ah... Guess I was. But the ancient kingdom I knew was already in its twilight years.” Gula's eyes turned distant as she gazed at the ceiling. “I don't know about their heyday either. That place was around for ages, you know.”

“I can't even imagine it. We humans are lucky to live a few decades at most.”

Some humans were lucky enough to live a whole century, but anything beyond that was meaningless on a human scale. *What's it feel like to live that long?* Loren thought. Then something occurred to him. “You guys were born

around the end of the ancient kingdom?”

“That’s right. What about it?”

“Well, the ancient kingdom fell a few hundred years back, right? And I heard you dark gods were sealed around the same time. So correct me if I’m wrong, but could it be that you weren’t actually *alive* for that time?”

He didn’t know whether it was right to say she had been “living” while she was sealed. At least, he didn’t think she’d been able to take in the outside world while in her sealed state, and he wondered if it had been more akin to a long nap.

“Hmm... Well, somethin’ like that. Can’t say I was in the outside world for long. A few decades at the end of the ancient kingdom, and a bit of time before the seal. Maybe a century or two.”

“Sorry, that’s long enough for me. I guess you really are an old—”

“Hold it right there! Who’re ya callin’ an old hag?! Just look at me! What part of me gives you that impression, huh?!” Gula protested, taking over before Loren could finish.

She *looked* like a young woman—and Loren had indeed been about to say so before she had interrupted. But now she’d said it for him, and he didn’t feel like repeating himself.

“You’re really over a hundred, though, right?”

“My heart has always been eighteen years old!”

“Didn’t you put down twenty-one at the guild?”

“I did?!” Gula held her head as she reeled back under Loren’s cold eyes.

Lapis picked that moment to open the door, returning with a handcart in tow. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s transfer our supplies from the wagon.”

The cart Lapis was pushing was large and made of metal. Perhaps they would need to cram a bit, but it would be sufficient to transport all their things. Loren quickly got to work.

“Still, Lapis, I’m surprised you managed to find this place,” Gula said. She

couldn't just leave Loren to take care of everything, and had started moving her own bags as well.

"I didn't find it," Lapis said, shaking her head. "This place just happened to be a suitable location to serve as my base. I'll tell you about that later."

"Base... You lived here?"

If this structure really was from the ancient kingdom, that made it an unexplored ruin, so Loren had to wonder if it was all right to just set up camp in it like that.

However, Lapis couldn't have been less sorry. She smiled and nodded. "This is where I stored what I brought from home, as well as my cash reserves."

"Ain't that unlawful occupation?" Loren asked as he placed the last parcel. They'd had to move a lot from the wagon, but had managed to pack it neatly somehow or another.

After tilting her head and thinking for a moment, Lapis confidently declared, "It's not like anyone's going to find out."

Lapis assured them that it was impossible to reach the facility without sinking through the sand, and given the depth, it was difficult to survive the journey. Loren got chills at the thought that Lapis had dragged him to such a place, and he grimaced, recalling how lightly she had treated it.

"It's even better than you think. Some of the functions in these ruins are still active, you know?"

In short, when Lapis first found the ruins, she had been identified as an intruder. The defense systems had apparently been quite a chore to handle. She'd fended them off somehow, and once she found the control room, had continued driving away the guardians as she analyzed how to take over the controls. In the end, she'd successfully gained control of the entire facility.

"It happened a bit after I was driven from my home. I had just been certified as a bona fide priest."

"That's, well...something."

If Lapis's words were to be believed, she had single-handedly discovered

these ruins, analyzed them, and made them her own.

“I’d brought loads of enchanted artifacts from home, so I was quite desperate. I didn’t want to have to part ways with them.”

Moreover, Lapis said, the ruins themselves had fortunately been on the verge of death when she found them.

“Even if someone happens to enter by accident, I have it set to immediately eject them. *You’re* safe because you’re with me... But it won’t be so simple where we’re going. I’ll register the both of you as visitors.”

It was up to Loren to push the cart as Lapis placed her hand on the wall beside the double door. What should have been a plain wall was suddenly streaming with letters of a language that Loren couldn’t read.

“It’s only guest registration. It will be over before you know it.”

Lapis slid her finger along the wall’s surface, tapping every now and then, but after a while, her eyes scrunched and her brow furrowed.

“I managed to register Ms. Gula...but it won’t accept Mr. Loren. How curious. Err... Oh, it didn’t reject you. You’ve been registered.”

“Is this safe? It’s an old place, and I don’t wanna be cut open the moment I go in,” Gula teased.

Lapis sounded a bit offended as she replied, “Don’t worry. It may be old, but it’s still under my supervision.”

She took her hand from the wall and opened the doors.

“Now please come in.”

Loren and Gula exchanged a look, wondering if this really checked out. Not that they had any other options. Lapis watched them with a wide smile as they walked through the doorway.

The door led into a long corridor, wide enough to easily accommodate the hefty pushcart. The walls on both sides were furnished with doors at regular intervals, with one last door where the passage hit a dead end.

“Ice Coffin.”

After seeing that Loren and Gula were both through the door, Lapis suddenly cast a spell. Loren turned back, curious as to what she was hoping to accomplish, only to find their abandoned carriage sealed in a block of ice.

“It would be a pain to arrange for the horse’s feed while we’re away, and it could make a mess. If I keep it in suspended animation, I can just cast Dispel on the way back.”

Lapis sounded eminently proud of this stroke of genius. But when Loren scanned the ice, it felt like his eye met the horse’s. He found himself apologizing in his heart.

The beast had carried their bags so far, only to end up swallowed by sand and frozen by ice. Loren couldn’t shake the pity he felt at the thought of abandoning it there for however long it took to return. But they couldn’t exactly leave anyone to look after it. He convinced himself that this was better than letting the animal starve.

“More importantly, we need to finish what we came here to do,” said Lapis.

“This is where we can shorten the trip to the mountain range, right?”

“Indeed. Although some measures must be undertaken before that.”

Lapis prodded at the brooch pinned to her chest—the tool by which they would report the route they took to reach demon territory. As things stood, it would give away the location of Lapis’s base.

“I’ll have to fiddle with it a bit to ensure I don’t give myself away,” she said as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

For her part, Gula looked like she could hardly believe what she was hearing. Loren didn’t fully comprehend what Lapis meant, so he looked between the two women, not knowing what was wrong.

“Fiddle... Lapis, you can alter enchantments?” Gula asked.

“Of course I can. I have all the equipment I need right here.”

Again, Loren didn’t intuitively understand that this was extraordinary. It was only Gula’s amazement that made clear that this was no mean feat. After all,

Lapis didn't make it sound difficult. She casually opened one of the doors and just as casually slid inside.

"I'll be done soon," she called. "Don't fret."

The door swung shut on her heels, but her voice prompted Loren and Gula to peek in behind her.

Lapis was in a dimly lit room with a desk. Strewn around were various pieces of equipment, the purpose of which Loren couldn't even begin to imagine. They all emitted a strangely ominous light in the gloomy atmosphere.

"If you have the item that artifact is paired up with, I think you could erase the location information on the brooch," Gula said. She was probably explaining for Loren's sake. "But it's crazy to think she can falsify the information inside it without the proper equipment. I may be called a dark god, but I couldn't replicate that."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep. But then why'd Lapis go out of her way to earn priest qualifications? Don't you think she shoulda just been a magician?" Gula pondered as she watched Lapis work.

Indeed, instead of becoming a priest, Lapis could have easily passed as a magician. She would have been an incredible one at that, and in great demand with adventuring parties. Instead, she had chosen a path that would earn her strange looks if she ever used magic.

"Are you wondering why I chose an occupation outside of the arcane?" Evidently, Lapis could still hear them, even if she was preoccupied. She didn't turn as she answered Gula's question. "It's quite simple, really."

"You don't mind me asking, then?"

"Not at all." Lapis glanced over her shoulder, locking eyes with her two observers as she tugged at the collar of her vestments. "It's because the clothes are cute. Magicians generally have to wear robes, don't they? They just drag on the ground behind you. Not the least bit charming."

Loren turned to Gula's dazed face. The self-proclaimed magician beside him

wore a revealing ensemble of a tube top and hot pants, which made her an exception to the rule. Most magicians did in fact wear robes, and Loren had never seen a magician like Gula before.

“How does a robe sound, Gula?”

“Never! Not on my life!”



“The vestments of the god of knowledge’s priesthood have an especially fine design. Just between us...demons generally aren’t religious, but the god of knowledge is special. He has a fair number of priests among my kindred.”

Loren had heard Lapis say as much before. Prior to that, he’d heard that demons didn’t truck with gods, and he had convinced himself that it was so. As such, Lapis’s revelation had come as quite a shock.

“In short, there have always been demons among the adherents of the divine Kuhklu... And for the sake of the demons who would follow in their footsteps, my predecessors intervened in the vestment design process.”

“You mean they misappropriated a whole religion?”

To think their robes had been reconfigured solely because some demon had wanted to look cute or cool... The influence the demons must have over Kuhklu’s clergy was unfathomable. It was even plausible that the qualification process was influenced by their demonic membership. Loren shuddered at the thought.

“It doesn’t go that far. We *could* do that, if we wanted, but one ought never go overboard with these things.”

Lapis plucked the brooch from her desk and held it up as if to judge her own handiwork. Perhaps she had learned something from the process. This was outside the bounds of Loren’s expertise, but Lapis seemed satisfied as she reequipped it.

“Our location information has been successfully altered. It might need some fine-tuning later, but we’ll be stopping by again, I’m sure.”

Otherwise, the horse and wagon at the entrance would be left there for an eternity. *We need to return, for the horse’s sake*, Loren swore to himself.

Meanwhile, Lapis took the lead again, leading them farther down the corridor.

“Are the other rooms also for tinkering?”

“Oh, no. This is my *base*—it’s not all work. There’s storage, a kitchen, and a residential area too. We could spend the night, if you wanted.”

Loren flatly shook his head at the invitation. He didn't fear that they'd be in danger if they stayed the night, but he also didn't fully believe that they could just up and reach the mountains from here. Thus, he thought it prudent not to waste any more time.

"You're such a worrywart, Mr. Loren. I'm telling you, it'll be just fine."

"Yeah, you're saying that. But those mountains are two to three days away, right? And let's not forget there's a desert right above us. Anyone who shrugged and believed we could get there any second now would be an idiot."

"How cautious..." Lapis narrowed her eyes.

But that was where the conversation ended. She knew it would be faster to show him instead of explaining herself, and so she walked down the passage with gusto.

Lapis stopped by a door no different from the last one. This time, after opening it, she stood by the side to concede the path to her stragglers. Perhaps she wanted Loren to go in and see for himself. He passed the pushcart to Gula and set foot in the new room.

Inside was a flat white platform. Decently spacious. Seemingly moored to the platform was a metallic ship-like something or other. It was about the same width as the wagon they had arrived upon, but twice as long. This was clearly some sort of transportation.

Two metal lines made of the same material stretched along the ground beneath the whatever-it-was. They extended into a cylindrical passageway with no visible endpoint. Although this tunnel was lit from the ceiling at regular intervals, there was no telling where it led.

After taking a good look around, Loren returned to Lapis and Gula, who were still waiting at the door.

"What's that supposed to be?" he asked Lapis.

"That, my good sir, is a direct line to the mountain. Once we hop aboard that ship and I turn it on, we'll be at the mountain's foot in two and a half stounds."

Loren once again stared at the boat-like vehicle. It didn't look like it could

achieve such speeds, but if Lapis vouched for it, then he wasn't going to argue.

"There are seats inside for the pilot and passengers. It only connects this location with another base at the foot of the mountains. It can't go anywhere else."

"Is this one of the ruin's functions?"

"Correct. I don't know who made it, or for what, but all that matters to us is that it's in usable condition."

If they had been archaeologists, they would have needed to research who'd made the facility, and when, and to what end. They were, however, nothing more than adventurers, which meant they could ignore the backstory as long as they got their hands on something profitable.

"Meaning we can load our bags onto that ship thing too?"

"The whole trolley should fit. Try shoving it through the back entrance. It should be fine."

"Can we leave as soon as we're loaded?"

"It seems you're worried about time, Mr. Loren, so we shall depart at once. There's a similar facility at our destination, so we'll rest up there."

It was still hard to buy that they would arrive at their destination as she claimed they would. As such, Loren had no reason to turn down her suggestion. He nodded.

Gula looked like she was up for a lie-down, but once Loren and Lapis had reached a decision, she was entirely unmotivated to argue.

"Then let's hop on."

Lapis opened a portal into the ship, beckoning them inside. Though Loren remained unfaltering on the surface, he was rather nervous beneath.

Chapter 3:

Departure to Reunion

ONCE THE PUSHCART and the party were on board, it began. Shockingly smooth, with hardly a sound, the vessel proceeded down the cylindrical tunnel with Lapis at the helm.

That said, the ship didn't seem to have any windows. The dreary interior was illuminated with that same unidentified light source, and there was no way of knowing what was going on outside. Loren could tell he was moving, but he had no clue how fast.

There were only a few seats for passengers and a shelf for luggage. It looked as though whoever designed it had done so in the pursuit of pure functionality.

"The major flaw of this transportation system is that you spend the whole time moving down a monotonous tube," said Lapis. "There's not an ounce of style to be found."

In a corner, there was a pedestal, roughly waist-high, that seemingly controlled the vehicle. Lapis's fingers slid all over its smooth top. Even when Loren looked straight at the control setup, he couldn't tell what she was doing. He quickly gave up on trying to understand.

"Even so, it travels as fast as the swiftest horse."

Two and a half stounds, by Lapis's estimate. No horse could maintain its top speed for that long. Even if a rider changed out their mount every so often, there would be no way to carry supplies at that rate.

With all that in mind, this mode of transportation could match a horse's speed for two and a half stounds with no interruptions. Loren saw it as considerably convenient. "Isn't the real flaw the fact that this thing needs this passage to be maintained for it to work?" he asked.

Lapis answered, "Indeed. You'll at the very least need decent rails."

According to her, the ancient kingdom had probably used this facility to

transport ores from the dwarven mines to the research laboratory. She didn't know where the main laboratory was; so far, she had only located and made a base in what she called a "small portion of the ancillary rooms."

"Huh?" said Gula. "Then that means those assets of yours were stored in one of those rooms back there?"

"Yes, what about it?" Lapis offhandedly replied.

Yet this got Gula to snap her fingers and click her tongue. "Dammit. I should have pinched a few when I had the chance."

These were treasures from Lapis's home. They were surely worth a fortune. If Gula got her hands on even one of them, she wouldn't have to worry about food and drink for a good long while.

The moment Lapis heard this, her hands lifted from the controls. As she turned toward Gula, Gula ducked behind Loren to use him as a shield.

With Gula sticking so close to his back, and Lapis threateningly closing the distance from the front, Loren found himself between a rock and a hard place. But the solution was simple enough. He hoisted up Gula and calmly placed her in front of Lapis.

"Gula!"

"I haven't! I ain't done nothin' yet!"

Gula frantically argued her case as Lapis fell upon her. As a ruckus broke out, Loren took a seat—this didn't concern him. He folded his arms and closed his eyes. There were still two stounds of nothingness left until their destination, if Lapis was to be taken at her word. It would be best to preserve his stamina and get as much sleep in as he could. That would make it easier to deal with anything that happened to pop up later.

Usually, he would have suggested the grappling girls do the same, but one couldn't meaningfully compare the stamina of a demon and dark god with that of a human. He even suspected that they might be a bit more manageable if they wrung out some energy.

"Wake me up when we get there. Go easy on each other."

“This is no joke! Loren! Stop Lapis for me!”

“Understood, Mr. Loren. I’ll wake you later! Good night!”

Beyond Loren’s closed eyelids, something was breaking, and something was being torn away. There was hitting and kicking, and all sorts of other unfortunate sounds. By the time the screams started—most likely from Gula—he realized it was dangerous to stay conscious any longer. Loren felt himself break out in a cold sweat as he forced his mind to calm down.

Eventually, drowsiness did come over him. All those noises drifted off to some far, distant land, and he entered a cozily dormant state. He wasn’t exactly asleep, nor was he completely awake, but it was pleasant nonetheless.

After some unknown amount of time, Loren woke to a gentle nudging from Lapis’s palm. “Excuse me, Mr. Loren. We have arrived at our destination.”

She sounded apologetic for having interrupted his time of solace. Loren waved a hand to tell her it didn’t matter as he lifted himself from the chair.

Sitting certainly wasn’t the best posture for sleep. Loren used his hands to massage the full-body stiffness from his arms and legs. That was when he discovered Gula’s unconscious body on the floor. He was incredibly curious as to what had happened while he was out, but there was something more important to address.

“We’re already there?”

“Yes, we have reached the station just before the mountains. Wasn’t that fast?”

Even if Lapis insisted this was the case, they were on a windowless craft. Loren had no way of knowing what was going on outside. He *could* tell that they were no longer moving.

“Are we all right to head out?”

“It should be fine. Shall we go and check?”

Before they unloaded their supplies, it was important to make sure they had properly arrived. Loren took Lapis up on her proposal. They left their bags and Gula’s limp body inside the mysterious craft, passed through a door, and wound

up in a long corridor much like the one in the base they had just left behind. Down at the end of that corridor, they found a pair of familiar double doors.

“Looks like this structure’s the same as the one in the desert.”

Then they entered a rather large, empty room. Back in the desert facility, the room that looked like this contained a frozen horse and wagon. The emptiness that met them seemed to insist that they were indeed somewhere new.

“We can exit from there,” Lapis said.

There was yet another door on the opposite wall. Lapis slipped past Loren and jogged over to it, sliding her palm lightly over its surface before slowly pushing it open. What then flooded the room was the cold night air, mingled with the scent of lush vegetation—the latter of which they would never have smelled in the desert.

Although the smell was proof in itself, Loren still couldn’t quite believe it as he peered through the open doorway. The first things to meet his eyes were sparse, yet overgrown trees. The sharp moonlight cut their silhouettes from the darkness.

The mountains lit by this same light were a fair distance away, but still towered so high that Loren had to look up to take them in. It was instantly apparent that it would be no easy task to cross them.

“So that’s the central mountain range that seals the demons off from the rest of the world.”

“If my people really wanted to cross, those mountains wouldn’t know what hit them,” Lapis bluntly stated. And Loren had accrued enough basic knowledge about demons that he was pretty sure she wasn’t exaggerating.

Demons were the sort of people who didn’t involve themselves with the outside world, but that avoidance was merely because they considered it more trouble than it was worth. If their interests ever turned outward, then those mountains would hardly impede them, and demon-kind would undoubtedly flood into the world at large.

“Anyway, don’t you see we’re near the base of the mountains now? In only four days, at that.”

It was three days from Kaffa to Lapis's base, and they'd taken less than a day to get from that facility to the mountains. They had cut a seven-to-eight-day journey in half. If they could use the same route on their way back, it would cut the round trip down considerably. Not that any other adventurers could replicate their method.

"Couldn't we make a killing charging money for this?"

"I don't believe we'd get many customers."

Unless adventurers were aiming for demon territory, few of them had businesses with the dwarves and their tunnels. With such a limited use, it would be quite difficult to earn a profit, regardless of the convenience.

"Hey, you could overcharge a bit. I think the silvers would still use it."

"You don't just find silver-ranked adventurers lying all over the place," Lapis answered.

Meanwhile, Loren walked out and scanned the area. They were on a slight hill, and the door he had just exited was on its slope.

"So this one's aboveground."

"The desert facility used to be aboveground too. It was just buried—originally it would have been like this one."

I guess so, Loren thought. No one would intentionally build their laboratory somewhere with such a troublesome commute.

"For starters, how about we spend the night here? Tomorrow morning, we can search for a dwarf to ask about the state of the tunnels before we decide whether to use the official shafts or take our chances with the abandoned ones."

"Know any dwarves?"

If they wasted time sniffing out dwarves, they could potentially lose all the time they had saved. *In that case, maybe it's best to just go for the abandoned shafts*, Loren thought. Although even then, there was no guarantee that a random tunnel would go all the way through the mountain. Not every mine made it that far. Choosing the wrong path would mean an even greater time

loss, and they would still lose all that they'd saved.

"Leave it to me. There's a dwarf I'm rather close to."

"Is there, now..."

It bore repeating that demons were detested by the other races, and neither were they the sort who attracted kinship. There were exceptions, much like Loren himself. This prevented him from saying anything too snarky on the matter, but he still found it difficult to believe any dwarves would befriend a demon.

"There's a simple trick to earning their interest—with rare ores and gold and whatnot."

"Wow, *real* simple!"

To be fair, that certainly sounded like a classic dwarf. But did the dwarves really have to be so very themselves even around demons? Loren found himself shaking his head.

Said Lapis: "I think it's far preferable to drowning oneself in troublesome arguments and justifications until one can no longer even follow one's own thoughts."

"That's, well... I guess," Loren reluctantly conceded.

"You can always trust a dwarf so long as you pay them upfront. Their simplicity is a tremendous gift."

Loren had no response to that. And if he had no rebuttal, he had to leave the matter to Lapis.

"I'm counting on you," he said.

"Naturally. We've been through this several times before." Lapis puffed up her chest to an arrogant extent as she gave a confident nod.

They backtracked and shook Gula awake, then extracted the pushcart, along with their supplies, and settled down to spend the night.

Unfortunately, Lapis didn't maintain living quarters in this base, and there was

no bedding to be found. However, there were sofas and chairs that could be pushed together as makeshift beds, and this was far better than camping outside.

The main advantage was that they had a door to shut. Everyone could sleep soundly until morning and wake up feeling refreshed.

Loren suspected Lapis or Gula might get up to some mischief while he was asleep, but new experiences came with their share of mental fatigue. Or perhaps they were being considerate. Either way, neither intruded on his rest that night.

The next day, they ate an unfussy breakfast and divided their supplies into three shares. These partitions were fastened together with shoulder straps Lapis kept at the base, and each member of the party hefted a share on their back.

The plan was to make it to the foot of the mountain, where Lapis would speak to the dwarf she knew.

“Leave the negotiations to me,” she insisted. “We might put him on guard if you two step in.”

Even without that advance warning, Loren and Gula had absolutely no intentions of involving themselves in the discussion. Lapis had a sack of ores at her hip, which she intended to use as leverage, and she took the lead.

After a stound of walking, the party arrived at an area that was supposedly a dwarven settlement. It was populated with cave dwellings near a hole-ridden stretch of mountain. Perhaps this was what constituted a village for dwarf-kind. There were none of the fields or wells one might find in the vicinity of a human settlement; it was all in all quite a drab place.

At a brief glance, it was hard to tell if anyone lived there at all. However, the presence of life, specifically the dwarven variety, was confirmed by the sound of stone smashing against metal as it echoed from the holes.

“Is old Mr. Diggs around?” Lapis called out.

They headed into the middle of the village, but no one came out to greet them. *Just how careless can they be?* Loren wondered.

The hammers they'd heard from all over came to a sudden stop. Short, stout bearded men emerged from their holes, each with massive hammers in hand and disgruntled looks on their faces.

"Who is it? Who's trying to get in the way of work?!"

"I am. Is Mr. Diggs here?"

The dwarves were furious—they looked like they were out for blood. But Lapis intercepted their fiery glares. With their sturdy bodies and brute strength, dwarves certainly made for fine warriors. As for whether they had the strength to stand against Gula—or Loren, with the white blade on his back—the answer was a resounding no.

If those wrathful looks set off the former mercenary or the glutton, a fight was sure to break out. Lapis was desperately trying to put a stop to it before it came to blows. For his part, Loren knew that dwarves had a short fuse and remained calm. But as things were going, it was possible the dwarves would be the ones to strike first.

"Who are you supposed to be?" one of them asked.

"I'm Lapis. You know, Lapis. The priest. Surely you haven't forgotten me?" Lapis said with a sociable smile.

The dwarves surrounded her, studying her closely, until one of them dropped his hammer and pointed. "Oh, I remember. She's the girl with the hangover medicine!"

"Oh, the miracle worker!"

The moment one of them hit home, the rest remembered in a cascading wave. Their faces lit up as they cheerfully crowded around Lapis.

Lapis handled them with a wry smile. She raised her voice to take the reins of the conversation again and ask, "I came to see Mr. Diggs. Is he here?"

"The demon lass, eh? Haven't seen you around lately."

The wall of beards parted to make way for a dwarf with an even finer, white mane. The moment he called Lapis a "demon," Loren felt a chill. He was yet concerned as to how the other dwarves would react, but their faces didn't

change in the slightest. It seemed these folks bore Lapis not the least bit of ill will.

“It’s been too long, Mr. Diggs. I came in the hope that you could show us the way.”

“To demon territory? So you’re finally returning to your parents, huh.” The dwarf called Diggs turned to Loren and Gula. “A human and... What’s that lewd creature? She’s definitely *not* human.”

“That lewd creature is...something I can’t really describe.”

The dwarves were all clad in pelts and thick cloth. Coupled with their long hair, beards, and mustaches, they had hardly any exposed skin to speak of. From their perspective, Gula’s exposed shoulders, chest, stomach, and thighs could only be described as “lewd.”

The word swiftly spread among the dwarves as they whispered to each other —“lewd, lewd, lewd.”

Gula clung to Loren’s arm, looking like she was about to cry. “Wait, I think my reputation’s takin’ a real hit here...”

“I can’t say I don’t see where they’re coming from.”

Loren would have silenced the dwarves if they were saying anything uncalled for. But it would have been hard to sound convincing when he didn’t exactly disagree.



“How about wearing a robe?” he asked.

“That’s lame. Don’t wanna.”

Loren patted Gula on the shoulder. *Then you just have to accept it*, he thought as he listened in on Lapis and Diggs’s conversation.

“Around how much will it cost to transport three people to demon territory?” Lapis asked, holding up her sack. She shook it, letting its contents clink.

At first, the dwarves seemed overjoyed, but their faces quickly turned grim. They hung their heads and averted their eyes. Old Diggs was the only one still looking at Lapis, and he was looking terribly vexed at that.

“Lately, there’s been a bit of a problem,” he admitted. “We’ve put our guide services on hold.”

“What happened?”

Lapis’s bag contained some terribly rare ores. To her, they were just some samples left behind in the ruins she’d taken over, but to dwarves, they were so precious that they’d do almost anything to claim them. If they were balking, the problem was serious.

“Something’s turned up on the usual route. All the guides and all the young’uns who went digging thereabouts stopped comin’ back.”

“What is it, exactly?”

It wasn’t rare for monsters to settle in the tunnels. Sometimes monsters that were for whatever reason sealed would be accidentally released when new tunnels opened their prisons. It was just one more tragedy of the sort that occurred all over the world.

“We don’t know. After all, no one’s returned.”

Presumably, search parties had been sent out, but if so, even those hadn’t come back. They as such had no idea what was haunting their mines.

“With that being the case, the grand tunnel has been closed off.”

This new term prompted Loren to whisper, “What’s the grand tunnel?”

Lapis glanced over, replying just as quietly, “The largest tunnel the dwarves

possess. It's also the easiest and most straightforward way to reach demon territory. When you branch off, the routing gets ridiculous. You'd probably die if you got lost."

"Aren't there any other tunnels?" Loren asked Diggs, only then remembering he wasn't supposed to speak.

After inspecting Loren suspiciously, Diggs turned to Lapis without answering the question. "What's he to you?"

"He is the leader of our party, as well as a precious person to me personally," Lapis replied without hesitation.

Although Loren felt a slight heat in his cheeks, Diggs exhaled loudly through his nose and stared at Loren. "You got terrible taste. No such thing as a decent beardless man."

"Is the beard really that important?"

"Naturally," Diggs passionately declared. His voice grew a good deal louder, and he grabbed Loren as he went on, "It's the *beard* that makes the man. Without one—"

Diggs suddenly found himself cut off.

Loren wasn't sure what had happened until he saw that Lapis had placed one of her slender fingers on Diggs's nape. The tip of her nail was lightly pushing into his skin.

"Did you say something...?" she asked.

Though Lapis smiled, Loren felt a chill. He instinctively extricated himself from Diggs even as the dwarf reached out a hand for salvation. The surrounding dwarves sensed something wrong and scattered like baby spiders. Meanwhile, although Gula seemed conflicted over whether to run away or hold her ground, she hadn't bolted just yet.

"What was that about my taste in men, Mr. Diggs? I'm sorry, but it would be ever so helpful if you said it a bit louder this time."

"H-hold on, missy! I know we can come to an understanding! It's just a figure of speech! A harmless gaffe! Calm down! I don't really think so! Honest!"

Lapis's finger gradually sunk deeper and deeper into the folds of his neck. Amidst desperate excuses, the old dwarf's face turned from red to blue. Though their eyes remained glued to the scene, Loren and Gula slowly backed away.

"Good grief. Who knew teasing was life and death?" Diggs rubbed his bright red nape. He lowered his head, looking away, trying to avoid Lapis's still-displeased glare.

It didn't seem right to continue the conversation out in the open, so they were led to a nearby work area.

The simple hut was steeped in dust and dirt, but the incredibly sturdy construction spoke volumes with regard to dwarven handiwork. The tables and chairs emitted not the slightest creak.

"You chose a terrible thing to tease about. I wouldn't mind if the jibe was directed at me *personally*..." Lapis grumbled. But there was no point letting the conversation linger there. As she settled across the table from Diggs, she said, "We must cross the mountains. We *have* to. Do you happen to have a map of the grand tunnel?"

"Well, we do, but... Do you want to see it?"

Diggs's reaction was all Loren needed to know that this wasn't going to be any help. Presumably most dwarves were possessed of an artisan's temperament. He sensed that most of them navigated the world on feeling and intuition. Lapis came to understand this all too soon—it was plain to see the second she took a glance at the map.

"Well, would ya look at that mess," Gula said, speaking her thoughts aloud.

The map was so densely packed with lines that it was hard to tell what was being depicted. So many additions, notes, and revisions had been made that it was a total mystery as to which path would get them where.

Even Diggs, after staring at the map closely, eventually pushed it out of sight. A few other dwarves took turns studying the map as well, muttering something or another, but they all looked defeated by the end.

“You’re not gonna say you don’t get it either, right?” Loren groaned, pointing at the map once it had made a complete round.

Diggs rocked back in his chair and confidently replied, “My memory is more reliable.”

It’s hopeless, Loren thought, putting a hand on his forehead. Dwarven mismanagement was the reason dwarf-kind could make a living guiding poor travelers through the tunnels. Had there been a properly maintained path and a proper map, people could reasonably expect to be able to make it through without additional guidance.

Unfortunately, these fine workers expanded their mines with no planning before the fact and no management after. Only the dwarves who dug the tunnels could make any sense of them.

“Then how about you lead us?” Lapis asked, seeing as Diggs was so confident in his memory.

Diggs’s eyes shifted this way and that as he stammered, “I-I don’t want to die just yet. I know you’re strong, lass, but I fear you won’t handle this one all on your lonesome.”

As far as Lapis was concerned, Loren and Gula were both her equal in fighting strength. She was ready to insist that the three of them could manage whatever was troubling the tunnels, but while Diggs knew her true identity, it would be difficult to convince him that her companions were on her level.

“It would be a different story if you had a few more folks on hand.”

“That’s a tall order...”

Not even Lapis could suddenly produce additional party members out of thin air. And it wasn’t like just anyone would do. They would need to be decently strong and skilled for Diggs to give his approval. The more Lapis thought about it, the more difficult the problem grew. “We’re at a loss.”

“Is this the only way through?” Loren asked. Taking a detour was starting to seem like the proper course of action.

“There is, I believe,” Lapis said, cocking her head. “Though I’ve never used it

before.”

There were other dwarven settlements besides this one. Naturally, there were other tunnels as well. But those other dwarves weren’t friendly with Lapis. Their party would have to hope they were open to negotiations.

“Although we’ll do whatever we must.”

“Well, if we can’t get through here, don’t we have to take that risk?” Loren asked. “Even if we do scrounge up the people we need, we’d have to find a way back, right?”

While the dwarves could guide Loren and his companions to demon territory, they wouldn’t be able to make it back alone. The dwarves wouldn’t just sit around and wait for them to be done with their business. Unless they eliminated whatever was blocking the grand tunnel, they would need to find some other means of getting there.

“This is a pain,” said Gula. “Should I start digging? I can just munch my way through.”

“How many days would that take?”

Carving a straight path through the base of the mountain would eliminate the need for a guide, but the distance Gula would need to dig was thoroughly absurd. *Though maybe she really could do it.* Loren had an inkling that the answer was yes. But surely that would take more time than they had.

“How about I give it a go?” Gula asked.

She was incredibly robust, even for a being called a dark god. Lapis found herself wondering if Gula’s inherent absurdity could render the impossible possible.

Sensing a change in the mood, Gula was about to get ready to go to town when there was a sudden knock at the door.

“Are there any earth workers here?”

The door opened before anyone could respond. In poked the head of a blonde woman in hunters’ garb. Her ears were as sharp as knives, and she had a bow in hand and a quiver on her back. After looking around—seemingly not the

least bit sorry for having entered without permission—she took note of Loren. A hint of surprise entered her level voice.

“Loren? Have you been behaving yourself?”

“Hmm? Err... Nym, was it?”

The woman before them hailed from the race known as the elves, and Loren did indeed recognize her. She was part of the silver-rank adventurer party he had met on his first quest as an adventurer.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We’re silver-rank adventurers. We’re obligated to make occasional contributions to the health of the nation and the guild. Part of that involves surveying demon territory—a job that earns us money and merit.”

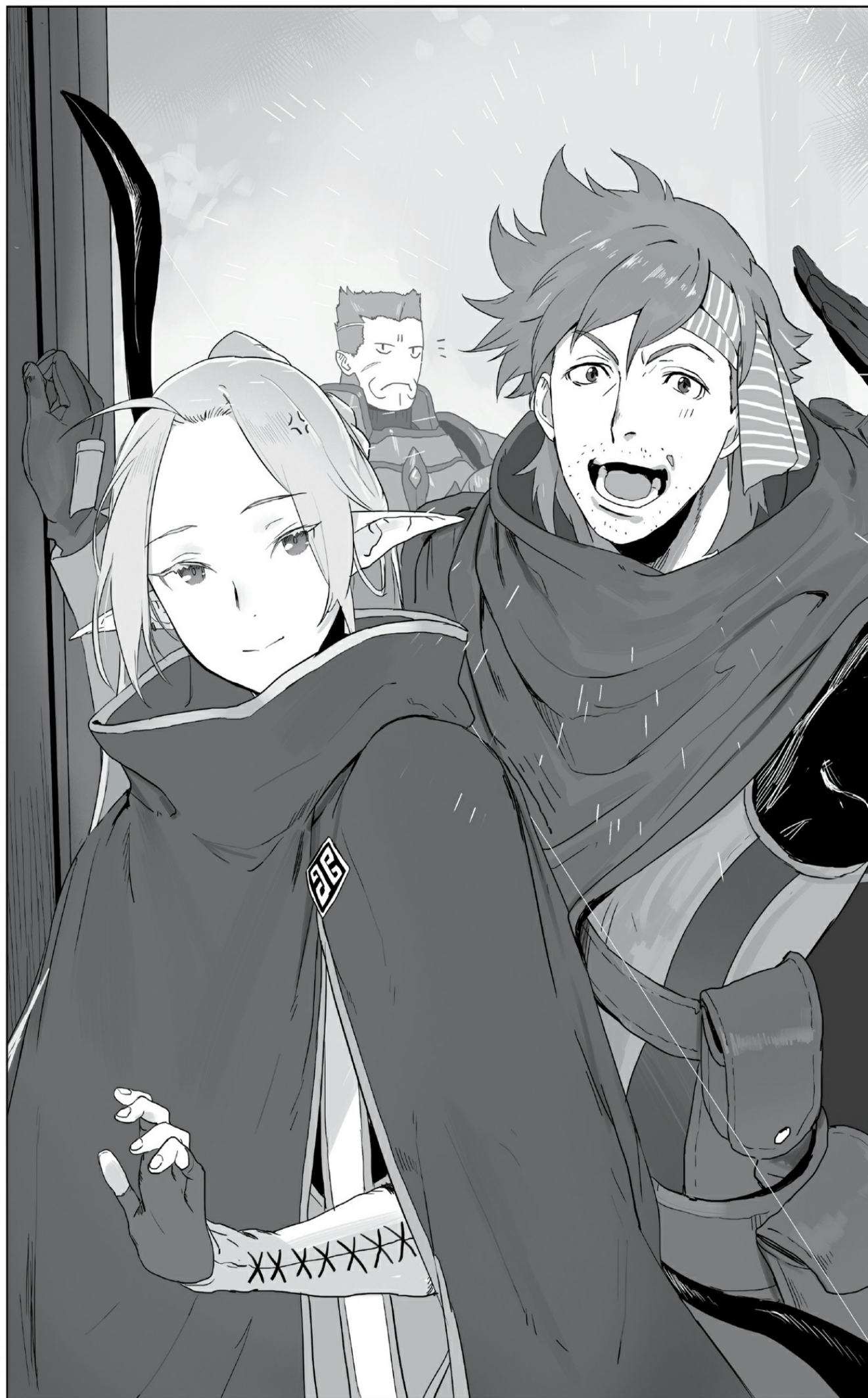
“Hey, Nym?” a voice called from outside. “You find any dwarves? If so, you gotta report back...”

Loren remembered the other voice as well. He could make out three figures behind her slim silhouette: a brown-haired thief with a stubble, an armored warrior with a buckler and longsword, and an old man in a robe. He knew them all as the silver-ranked adventurers who made up Nym’s party.

“Were we interrupting something?” said one of them. “Wait, hold up. I’ve seen that face before.”

“Well, long time no see,” said Loren. “Glad you look well.”

The man dressed like a thief lightly pushed past Nym and grinned. “Is that a new party member I see? A woman, too. You aiming for a harem?”



“I wasn’t aiming for anything. It just panned out this way.”

Loren’s face had turned slightly bitter. Chuck—the silver-ranked thief—slapped him on the back and shoulders as if to say he was only joking.

The leader of this party was Ritz—the swordsman standing behind them. Meanwhile, the old man with a staff was Koltz, the party’s magician.

“Now, now, I can’t say I don’t get it. But leave some for the rest of us, ya lady-killer.”

“Pipe down, Chuck.” Having conceded the way to Chuck, Nym planted a firmly clenched fist into his unguarded flank. The impact reached his internal organs. He writhed and fell, only for his body to be kicked to the side. Nym turned her impassive face to Loren and spoke in a monotone. “Loren’s a good kid. He doesn’t select comrades with illicit intentions.”

“Where’s...all that...trust coming from, eh?!” Chuck wheezed through his pained breaths.

“Experience,” Nym casually replied.

“Oh, really.”

Out of strength, Chuck fell limp to the floor. With one last look at him, Nym turned to Loren. Loren had remained sitting, a troubled look on his face. She walked up and patted his head.

Lapis watched on enviously, while the dwarves were taken aback by these sudden developments.

Then Gula clapped her hands with a sudden realization: “Doesn’t this solve the problem?”

“What?”

“We have one copper and two irons. Didn’t she just say they’re silvers? If we add them to the roster, that’s four silver-ranked adventurers in addition to us. Doesn’t that mean we can deal with just about anything?”

It made sense. Any copper who completed their work without dying could rise to iron, given enough time. However, only a select few irons ever rose to silver

rank. While the true strength of Loren, Lapis, and Gula was another matter, with this additional party, they had surely gathered a fighting force that would put Diggs at ease.

This wasn't incorrect, from an outside perspective. However, Ritz's party had seen Loren fight before, and they seemed a bit anxious at the thought of being placed above him.

"How about you start by explaining the situation to us as well?" Ritz asked. "We can think about it after that."

He had to remind everyone that his party had only just arrived before he made any decisions. As such, Lapis introduced them to Gula, then summarized the story, adding in whatever few tidbits were necessary for context while concealing whatever information she could get away with.

Chapter 4:

Negotiations to Attack

“I SEE. I get the gist,” Ritz said once he had processed the situation. He looked at the faces of his comrades, then at Loren’s party, before continuing. “Knowing what I know now, I propose exterminating whatever it is that has built a nest in the grand tunnel.”

The dwarves seemed delighted to hear this. Their joy, however, did not reach Loren or Lapis, who both wore conflicted looks. There was a huge difference between slipping through the tunnel while only fighting immediate threats, and pinning down and eliminating the root cause. The latter was self-evidently more difficult.

“Might I ask why you’re purposely choosing the more troublesome route?” Lapis asked, taking care to keep her words calm.

With a grave nod, Ritz explained, “Because we often use this tunnel.”

“You’ll be paying us, then...right, Mr. Ritz?” Lapis immediately followed, her eyes as cold as ice.

Ritz shut his mouth at that one.

The long and short of the matter was that Ritz’s party used the grand tunnel relatively frequently and would be in a bit of trouble if it remained sealed. Now that they had Loren’s party along for the ride, this was their best opportunity to take care of the problem.

If he were underhanded about it, he could frame it by saying they shared the same goal of getting through, and that therefore Loren and his party ought to do the work for free. Lapis swiftly caught on to this possibility.

“Hey, come on,” said Ritz. “You’re also trying to use the tunnel, right? Then can’t we work together to—”

“Money, please.”

“I mean, we both stand to gain. It’s not like we’re hiring you—”

“Oh, just fork it over already.”

Ritz tried his best to persuade her, but Lapis refused to fold. Loren eyed their discussion, fearing it would draw on for a long time. For some reason, Gula began whispering with Nym.

“We’re a copper and two irons, right? Shouldn’t it be somewhere around this?” Gula said, signaling some numbers with her fingers.

Nym shook her head. “We’re buying your skills, not your rank. Naturally, as their comrade, we assume you’re a skilled fighter as well. But that amount is still a bit high. I ask that you be a bit kinder on our wallets.”

“All right, if you insist... How about this much?”

“A bit lower. This is the most we can do.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

They had thrown themselves into the negotiation and gathered a bit of attention in doing so. When Nym realized this, she nonchalantly said, “We’re going to end up paying anyway. We should hurry up and decide the amount.”

“You really understand us, elf lady,” Gula said with a smile.

“Now look here, Nym...”

“Ritz, I think Nym has a point here,” said Chuck.

“As do I,” said Koltz. “We’ll only ruin their impression of us if we draw it out too long. Just pay them and get on with it.”

Seeing as the rest of the party members had joined Nym’s side, a bit of bonus pay seemed inevitable. Loren decided to leave the fine details to Lapis and Gula, turning his attention to Diggs.

“Four silvers, two irons, and a copper. That’s seven capable adventurers guarding you,” he said. “That enough for you to guide us?”

Two entire parties just to make it through a tunnel. This would usually be overkill, especially with one of the parties being silver rank. Diggs as such couldn’t find it in himself to complain.

“I guess so. It’s not like we want that tunnel sealed up forever. If you’ll solve

the problem, I'll be happy to guide you, and I'll even invest some funds in the operation."

"How about we just cancel out your guide fees?" Loren asked.

Lapis been just about to bring up those fees, but if Diggs was willing to chip in, Loren would prefer his contributions come in a form that put the least burden on Lapis.

Diggs immediately nodded. "If that's all right with you. I'll lead you myself."

That was one matter off the table.

Under normal circumstances, it took only half a day to reach demon territory through the grand tunnel. However, that assessment didn't apply to the current situation, and Diggs said he needed to make preparations. Meanwhile, Loren and his party remained on standby in the tent they had used for the discussion.

The dwarves were rushing around, preparing supplies for Diggs.

"It kinda looks like kids wandering aimlessly," Loren remarked. And understandably so. Lapis was the shortest member of his party, and the dwarves were far shorter than she was. Height-wise, they were no taller than children.

Their splendid beards and stalwart physiques made it difficult to actually mistake them as such. Then again, here and there, Loren spotted dwarves without beards, who looked just a little slimmer than the other ones.

"Those are dwarven women," Lapis explained as she gazed out beside him, watching the dwarves work.

Apparently, most people believed that dwarven women grew beards just the same as men. Loren had been one of them. Although real dwarven women were still built like brick walls, they had a dainty quality—at least compared to the men. And they were indeed beardless.

"You're telling me those aren't the kids?"

"No. They're proper adult women."

Loren took another good look, but he failed to shake off his initial impression. To him, the scene before him looked like a bunch of kids being forced to carry bags too great for their height.

“Do we need all that?”

“Dwarves eat a great deal and drink even more. Perhaps these food supplies are more for their own sakes.”

“Come to think of it, they mentioned something about a hangover cure.”

“Well, many of them drink without any consideration for their limits. They may be known for their constitution, but it’s hardly infinite.”

Dwarves had a higher alcohol tolerance than humans, but they were still tormented by headaches if they overindulged. This was when their constitution came back to bite them in the ass—most medicines had limited effect on dwarf-kind.

Thus, the dwarves saw hangovers as something one simply had to put up with, which would at least go away *eventually*. Lapis was the first person any of them had met to offer an effective antidote.

“You serious? No one ever attempted that before?”

“Do you imagine many demons would go out of their way to do such a thing?”

Demons cared far more about themselves than anyone else, an ideology that inspired them to make far too much trouble and consequently left them with a terrible reputation. There was no way a demon would devise a hangover cure for a dwarf for no reason.

Lapis was no different. She had offered the medicine as part of her payment for guidance through the tunnels. Up until that point, she hadn’t been the least bit concerned about the dwarves rolling on the floor, clutching their heads.

“Paying in headache medication was quite a bargain for me.”

“I’ll bet it was.”

Though it varied in quality, it was possible to obtain a decent amount of headache medicine from your average town apothecary for a measly silver coin. No doubt Lapis’s medicine had been far cheaper to make than it would have

been to pay the usual fees.

Since medicine largely didn't work on dwarves, they had no real concept of apothecaries. Nor did it ever occur to them to try their hand at the business. It was no exaggeration to say that Lapis had a monopoly on the dwarven medication market.

It seemed she'd started with a hangover cure and gradually transitioned to other drugs. Huh.

"Did you ever teach them how to... No, I guess not. So why didn't you plan on paying in medicine this time?"

He supposed an excess of supply always lowered industry demand. When the value of her service decreased, Lapis would need to increase the variety and quantity of the medicines she dealt in. Being a demon, she never shared anything with others that might result in a net loss for herself.

But even if that was part of her reasoning, she had come to this meeting armed not with medicine but with ores. They had also come from a facility with a work room—and though the ores hadn't put a strain on her wallet, Loren couldn't help but wonder if medicine wouldn't have been a better deal for her.

"Ever since I became an adventurer, I've been using my medicine reserves on myself," Lapis answered with a wry smile. "I don't really have a surplus. I could have bought some in town, but I forgot."

Giving away her current supply risked leaving her in a tight spot, if an emergency should arise. Therefore, she had transitioned to partaking of her base's ore deposits.

"The medicine you guys make back home must be leaps and bounds above the stuff we get..."

"Oh, it's roughly the same. In fact, there might be more variety out here."

Demons weren't as inured to medicine as dwarves, but they were still sturdier than humans. They were more resistant to illness and injury, and thus it was the humans who were more reliant on medicines whose study of it was more advanced.

“It’s the classic example of varying strengths. Just because we’re naturally stronger, that doesn’t mean everything about us is more sophisticated.”

“If you don’t need the stuff, I don’t see a problem on your end.”

As a former mercenary, Loren sincerely admired the ability to remain standing without external support. After all, his previous industry was inextricably linked with injuries. National armies employed military doctors, but mercenaries did not. Maintaining medicine and bandage inventory was a never-ending problem for both the head and wallet.

“I think it’s more admirable that you humans strive to treat minor ailments and abnormalities with the fruits of your progress. We should take a page out of your book.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Well, I presume it is.”

They exchanged a look that made it clear that Lapis had just said it for the sake of saying it.

It was precisely at this moment that Diggs finished packing his bags. He called to Ritz, who had, given his position, taken on the leading role. Ritz gave them all a final cautionary pep talk and gave the signal to head out.

Based on its name, Loren imagined the “grand tunnel” as a cavern of massive proportions. However, considering it had been dug by dwarves of diminutive stature, he also feared it might be far smaller than he envisioned.

He could only know after he saw it. And once he had been guided to the tunnel, his mouth was left gaping. For a while, he looked up at the entrance, at a loss for words.

“By the look on your face, this must have come as a complete surprise,” Lapis said.

She didn’t need to spell it out; the entrance was nothing like anything Loren had imagined. The only word he could use to describe it was “big.” Loren was tall for a human, but he had to crane his neck to even catch a glimpse of the

ceiling. Once they were inside, he found that it was so distant that the lantern light didn't reach it. The tunnel was moreover so wide that it could have fit several people of Loren's stature marching shoulder to shoulder with room to spare.

"What're you spacing out for?" Diggs called to Loren, who was still frozen at the entrance.

Loren finally snapped to his senses when Lapis poked him in the side, and he hurriedly walked forward. "It's huge. *Too* huge, I'd say."

He'd heard the tunnel had been sealed, but there was neither door nor barricade at the entrance. Not that there existed a door large enough to close off such a large portal. Even if they barricaded the entrance, the ample height of the cave would allow anything that wanted to simply jump over the obstacle.

"If you're digging ore out of the walls, of course it's gonna get huge."

"You can get up that high at your height?"

"Don't underestimate the lengths we'll go to for good stone."

Loren didn't know if that was something to brag about, but Diggs seemed proud as could be. At first, Loren considered retorting, but perhaps that was just common sense in dwarven circles. He decided it was best to stay silent.

Whatever the reason, the tunnel was large, and this worked in Loren's favor, as it could likewise accommodate his large weapon. No one had yet returned from this tunnel; he would need an environment where he could fight to the fullest.

Once he set foot inside, the air turned slightly warm. As Loren understood it, in most caves, the air inside was colder than the air without, but this place seemed different.

"Do you have a furnace in here or something?"

Perhaps the bulkier deposits were refined down here. That would make them easier to transport—or at least, Loren thought that might be the case. Diggs was quick to write it off.

"Fool. How can you properly refine anything in a cave?"

“Then why’s it so warm here?”

“No clue. There might be a heat source somewhere. I don’t think we dug deep enough to hit magma, but we sometimes reach heated water.”

Even if the true reason was unclear, Diggs insisted this was better than the freezing alternative. Certainly, a bit of heat would help their muscles keep from going stiff. And anyway, if the dwarf experts on hand couldn’t explain a given phenomena, no human could hope to either. Loren dismissed the train of thought.

As the entrance was supposed to be sealed—though seemingly this was only the case on paper—there was no one else around. They heard no sounds save for their boots tapping against hard stone. Nothing stood out as out of the ordinary, and they were naturally left with nothing to do but walk.

“How far is it to the other side?”

If they had been in a dungeon, they would have had to be wary of traps. In that case, Chuck would be walking in the lead as the group thief. However, they were moving through a dwarven worksite, where traps would just get in the way of business. Collapsed floors and cave-ins were the greater danger. Diggs, the most knowledgeable about the tunnel, took the vanguard instead. Chuck followed warily behind him, while the rest walked farther back in one clump.

“Half a day if nothing stops us. Didn’t I say that before?” Diggs asked.

“I might have heard it, but I’ve got nothing else to talk about,” said Loren.

With Diggs guiding them, and Chuck and the sharp-earned Nym keeping watch, walking was all Loren could realistically occupy himself with.

“Just shut up and move. If nothing happens, we’ll get there soon enough.”

“If nothing happens, sure.”

Still, the only sound was their own footsteps. They seemed to be the only things moving.

So why had no one before them ever managed to make it back? Surely there had to be something down here.

Suddenly, Loren heard a voice in his head. *«Mister, can you hear me? There’s*

something I want to ask Mr. Dwarf at the front.›

That was the voice of Scena, the Lifeless King whose astral body dwelled within Loren. He turned his attention inward to listen to her argument and subsequently rephrase it as his own.

“Say, how many people shrugged off the warnings?” he asked. “How many didn’t return?”

“Odd way to put it. Let’s see. As far as we’re aware, a few dozen. Dwarves, humans, all sorts. Can’t say how many snuck in behind our backs.”

Before the grand tunnel was sealed, access to the entrance had been strictly controlled. Getting in without the dwarves finding out would have been next to impossible. Dwarf-kind were always on high alert when it came to their worksites. However, once people had stopped coming back from the grand tunnel and the area had been designated off-limits, their security had become a bit lax.

After all, whoever went into the tunnel never came out. What was the point of protecting it when not even they could go inside? Thus, the grand tunnel had been nearly abandoned.

“You’re okay with that?”

“We told ’em not to go and they went anyways. It was out of our hands at that point.”

Loren understood where Diggs was coming from. There was, however, something else he needed to confirm first. Scena had been the one who wanted to know. In his mind, he asked her if she was satisfied with that answer.

After a moment’s silence, she muttered, *‹I am detecting signs of life force in every direction.›*

Just because the tunnel was sealed didn’t mean it had to be a land of death. *It’s not strange for there to be an ecosystem in here*, Loren thought. Then again, although this wasn’t a natural geological formation, maybe it was odd for there to be so much life in a dwarf-made hole.

‹Even if I restrict my scan to human-sized life forces, there’s still a good

amount. I thought that perhaps the people who entered might still be alive... But the numbers aren't adding up...›

Scena's words grew muddled. This muddling left a terrible taste in Loren's mouth, and he urged her to explain.

There was a rather hesitant air about Scena before she finally stated, *‹There are too many for me to count. I would put them at just short of ten thousand.›*

It took a few moments for Loren to comprehend what she was saying. He was always afraid that, when he spoke to her, anyone who didn't know of the circumstances he shared with Scena would assume he had gone mad. As such, whenever they conversed, Loren therefore attempted to keep his face as straight as possible. Yet as her meaning dawned on him, he barely managed to swallow a farcical yelp before it escaped his lips.

He didn't know what Scena was picking up, but her senses had never yet steered him wrong. This meant that several thousand human-sized lifeforms were living within these very same supposedly empty tunnels. He couldn't even ask himself to keep his cool.

In the first place, this was primarily a mine for the excavation of ore. It was hard to imagine so many human-sized lifeforms could even live here. Loren's eyes shifted restlessly as these thoughts overcame him.

Lapis realized he was acting strange. "Mr. Loren? What's wrong?"

For a moment, Loren didn't know how to answer. He would have relayed the truth verbatim if he were alone with Lapis and Gula. However, they were accompanied by Ritz's party as comrades and Diggs as their guide. There was no telling what fuss they might kick up if they learned of Scena. Though Loren was prone to forgetting this fact, Scena was a Lifeless King, a terrible undead being that was said to bring countries to ruin.

But how could he explain knowing about the nearly ten thousand lifeforms without mentioning Scena? If he tried to justify himself, he'd have to hand-wave his information as *instinct*. Surely that argument would lack any and all persuasive power.

"Mr. Loren?" Lapis doubtfully repeated, seeing as he hadn't yet answered.

Gula and Diggs had stopped, suspecting something was wrong. Loren was formulating how to respond, but these efforts soon proved unnecessary.

“Did you sense somethin’? Is your mercenary instinct actin’ up?”

Gula’s words visibly set Ritz’s party on edge. They readied their weapons, looking around with grim faces.

“What did you pick up?” Ritz asked.

“It’s just a hunch. Nothing definitive.”

“Well, thanks, anyways. If nothing happens, no harm in being prepared. If something happens, we’ll be ready for it.”

Was there any additional information he could pass along? Loren asked Scena for permission to use her senses, and Scena immediately obliged. Just as Scena could feel and see everything Loren did, she could also share senses he didn’t naturally possess.

In this case, the nearly ten thousand life signals were suddenly reflected in his own eyes. The instant she began to share, Loren saw an entirely new world.

“You gotta be kidding me...” he whispered.

Each human-sized life signal was projected as a point of light. Loren could no longer see the stone walls that formed the tunnel; his eyes were consumed by the sight of all that individual life. And there they were, filling up his entire view. Countless signals glimmered back at him.

Loren was lost as to how to pass on the message. Looking up, he made out innumerable lights in the darkness beyond the lantern’s reach. These surely were no ordinary foes—not when so many of them were sticking to such a high ceiling.

Worse yet, their enemy was ready to spring an ambush, and only Loren had noticed. A chill ran down his spine. After all, their party consisted of not only silver-rank adventurers but a dark god—and a demon to boot. They were all first-rate fighters, and they weren’t half-assing their job. They were all on guard. Yet they still hadn’t noticed the threat looming right overhead.

Humans did tend to neglect whatever was above them, but this was abnormal. Specifically, it was proof of their foe's abnormal stealth.

Loren was about to open his mouth—he needed to warn the group even if he couldn't justify himself. Then he saw Ritz brush up against something slender hanging from the ceiling. Loren kicked off and charged before he had managed a single word.

"Mr. Loren?" Lapis exclaimed at his sudden action.

However, Ritz was surely even more startled. He had been walking at the front only for Loren to abruptly rush from behind and sweep at his feet. Ritz was an experienced silver-rank adventurer, but that didn't mean he was prepared to take a surprise attack from behind—and from an ally, no less.

Ritz tumbled helplessly to the ground. He was about to yell at Loren, but instead, his face stiffened. Loren's white blade passed through the space where Ritz had stood only a moment before, bisecting something along the way and scattering blue fluid in the process.

"Whoa!" Chuck retreated a step in surprise, only to be silently kicked out of the way by Nym.

She didn't spare him a second glance. Swiftly nocking an arrow, she released it at something that had fallen from the ceiling.

"Gula! Support Lapis!"

"You got it."

Loren sliced through another descending assailant as Gula grabbed Lapis's shoulder and held her close to the ground. She looked up—and with that mere glance, the life signals above their heads began to be snuffed out, one by one.

"What was that?!" Chuck wailed as Nym readied another arrow. Her aim was precise even with inadequate lighting.

Ritz stared at the fiend her arrow had slain, his voice stiff. "Some sort of insect?!"

"No. A spider," Nym said.

Her voice was so calm that Loren wondered if she was the least bit bothered.

He swung his sword again, splitting another creature and splattering it against the ground. She was right—it was a spider.

But its size was incredible.

The spider's massive abdomens were as large as Lapis or Koltz, the party's smallest members. Their rear ends expelled threads so fine that it was a wonder they supported such massive bodies. These were the assailants that had dropped upon the party from the ceiling.

"Damnit! What hole did they crawl out of?!"

"Must've been stuck to the ceiling, right?!"

With their enemy's identity now clear, Ritz stood, using his shield to smack away a falling spider. The intense force dented the spider's body and slammed it into the wall, producing a wet sound and another splatter of blue body fluids.

"O shot of red, pierce through my foe! *Fire Bullet!*"

Koltz kept a low stance as he held up his staff to use magic. The flaming bolt fired from the tip of his staff flew toward the ceiling without any particular aim. Upon impact, it scattered into particles of light.

What his flame illuminated gave the party below a terrible shock.

The ceiling was densely packed with spiders, all just as massive as the ones they had just faced. In the crevices between the beasts were the individuals who had become their last meal.

Those poor souls were lightly bound in threads and stuck to the veiling. All that remained of them was a thin layer of skin over bone.

The sight was so profoundly gruesome that it summoned a mutter from Gula. "That's nasty..."

"How are we supposed to deal with *that*?!" Chuck screamed, stabbing a dagger into a spider that had fallen from the impact of Koltz's magic.

There were so many spiders and in such density that no one could give Chuck an answer. Loren would have suggested retreat in the face of these overwhelming numbers, but the spiders weren't keen on letting their prey escape, now that said prey had stepped into their web.

The beasts circled around to loom over the escape route and began slicing the strings suspending their previous victims. Those poor souls fell from a substantial height, reaching speeds that would deal considerable damage when they hit. Some still wore the armor and weapons they had wielded in life, and with all of that falling with them, it would be difficult to make it through the storm.

And as all this happened, the spiders continued to descend upon them.

“Behind’s no good. We have to rush through.”

“Fine—everyone, run!”

As Ritz issued the order, he grabbed Diggs, who was holding his head, and raced deeper into the tunnel. Everyone followed, picking up the pace to flee the spiders giving pursuit.

“Will running get us anywhere?!” Chuck wailed as he swung his dagger. He managed to sever one spider’s legs. Then Nym, as she passed by, fired an arrow that pinned it to the tunnel wall.

“I don’t know. But we don’t have any other options.”

“Damn it all to hell! Were they above us the whole time?!” Chuck cursed.

Loren ran at the rear and glanced over his shoulder. Be it floor, wall, or ceiling, the spiders were so tightly packed together that he couldn’t even see the stone. There were so many that he didn’t even consider facing them with conventional means.

How could they possibly have gathered so many in such a short span of time? Loren thought.

Lapis answered his unspoken question as she raced at the lead. “Spiders give birth to countless children. Their population can rapidly swell to outrageous numbers given the right environment. It probably came from demon territory.”

“Hey, Diggs. What’s it like on the other side of this tunnel?”

Though dwarves were sturdy, their limbs were short. They weren’t known for their agility. Diggs was only alive thanks to Ritz doing the running for him, but once Ritz’s arms could no longer bear his dwarven weight, his chances of

survival were slim.

Diggs understood this well, and so his face was pale as he desperately brandished the lantern to light the way. “Well, I mean, there’s a settlement on that side too. It’s another dwarven community.”

“Oh... I see.”

Loren had a terrible feeling about this. But he couldn’t worry about it now. The spiders hot on their heels took precedence. He stopped thinking, focusing only on moving his arms and legs. When he spied a slender something from the ceiling coiling around Lapis’s shoulder, he picked up his pace.

“Huh?! Ah!”

Lapis felt something yank on her shoulder. She had no time to process what was happening before her feet left the ground. Then burly arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and the sensation in her shoulder faded.

“Look out! They’ve left threads to catch us!”

It had started with the first thread that Ritz had touched. When that fine string touched Ritz’s body, the vibrations informed the spiders that someone had entered their domain. This spurred them on to attack.

But those detection threads weren’t the only dangers. The thread that had caught Lapis was stronger and stickier, meant to capture prey. Anyone thus caught would immediately be reeled to the ceiling where the spiders would fall upon them.



“Even if I want to look out, I can’t see them.”

The lantern light on which they relied left them barely able to navigate the dark tunnels. How could they spot fine spider threads hanging from the ceiling? Each individual thread was strong enough to lift a human off their feet, yet they were so thin they were nearly invisible to the naked eye.

“So I was nearly dragged off,” Lapis said in Loren’s arms. She shuddered as she looked at the ceiling.

Perhaps a demon like her could have managed, but she had no desire to experience the sensation of so many spiders crawling all over her. Moreover, if any of them were venomous, there was always a chance, however slight, that their venom might pierce even her demonic constitution. Upon realizing this, Lapis felt rather grateful that she had been rescued.

“Thank you, Mr. Loren.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m glad I got there when I could still reach you.”

The ceilings were too high for the lantern light to reach. The passages were also vast, and if Loren couldn’t find the footholds to climb up the walls, he wouldn’t be able to save her if she was lifted to the top.

“Nym and Koltz, you be especially careful! You’re light and weak, so they’ll snatch you up in an instant!”

“I don’t want to die as spider food.”

“Me neither. I intend to live another thousand years,” Nym said with a straight face.

Chuck couldn’t help but mutter, “A thousand’s a bit too long for me.”

“Where’s your willpower? Live even if you have to become an undead to do it. Are you really going to leave me alone?”

“Hmm? Can you really call that living?” Chuck asked sincerely.

Looks like you’re taking this real easy, huh? Loren thought as he jerked his head toward the path ahead of them.

Chapter 5:

Attack to Pursuit

THUS, THE PARTY continued to run. Perhaps there were fewer spiders on their tail than before, but that hardly made a difference. They were like a tsunami—an arachnid avalanche.

“I don’t have nearly enough arrows for this,” Nym grumbled. Her quiver was already down by half.

Every now and then, she turned and fired one off at the spiders; her arrows had the force to skewer several in one shot. However, any hole she made was soon filled by new spiders from behind, and it didn’t seem like her attacks were the least bit effective.

“There’s a limit to my magic as well.”

Koltz, frantically keeping up, had abandoned the idea of magic from the start. Their foes could bury them, even in this massive tunnel. Firstly, the spiders could catch up in the time he took to chant. Secondly, even if he did by some stroke of luck manage to invoke magic, he would only pick off a few more than Nym’s arrows. This was not going to save the day.

“Ritz! How about you hold them back for a bit?!” Chuck wailed.

“How about you do it?!” Ritz shouted back.

Of course, neither was serious. Should anyone stop for even an instant, they would be swallowed by the spider tsunami before they could block or slice a single leg. They were both keenly aware of this.

Loren also understood. He had decided he would only swing his sword when spiders fell from above and invested the rest of his reserves into running.

Someone’s going to reach their limit eventually, Loren thought darkly. He wasn’t too concerned about Lapis—who was still in his arms—or Gula, who was running right behind him. His biggest concern was the elderly Koltz, whose arcane occupation didn’t demand he keep his physical body in the same

condition as his companions’.

As a matter of fact, Koltz was speaking less and less the more time passed. Now and then, pain touched his expression.

“How much longer to the exit?!” asked Ritz.

There was no way a dwarf could outrun those spiders with their legs. Diggs remained in Ritz’s arms, doing his best to hold out the lantern. “Sorry to say there’s a long way to go! We’re not even halfway there!” he shouted.

This answer meant the situation was near hopeless.

“We’re doomed!” Chuck shrieked.

No human could run for so long at max speed. Anyone would scream under such circumstances.

“Gula! Any ideas?!” Loren asked.

Gula was nominally their other magician. Loren wasn’t asking for magic that could deal damage to a wide area; he was more wondering if she could manage something with her dark god powers. They would undoubtedly be interrogated about those afterward, but that would be way better than becoming spider feed.

Her answer wasn’t so hopeful. “Even I’ll be swarmed if I stop here.”

“*Earth Wall* won’t be effective either.”

If the passage were lower and narrower, then the spell that created an earthen wall could serve to temporarily stall the spiders. However, no magician could muster a wall of sufficient magnitude to block them in these massive halls.

“Weren’t we in this same situation once before?”

“Yes, goblins, was it? But don’t worry, Mr. Loren,” Lapis confidently said, and Loren had to wonder where she’d found hope in this situation.

When he cast his doubtful eyes upon her, she went on in a resigned tone, “Last time, only the women were at risk of becoming goblin seedbeds. This time, we’re all in it together. We’ll all be eaten or implanted with their eggs.”

“What’s not to worry about?!”

“You guys sure sound relaxed,” Ritz sighed.

Near to him, Koltz nearly tripped and Nym and Chuck both grabbed one of his arms to hoist him up, making sure he didn’t take a tumble. It was nevertheless clear that he couldn’t go on much longer.

“Oi, Loren,” Ritz said with a frown.

“If you’re gonna tell me to take Diggs and go ahead without you, I’m not listening,” Loren cut him off before he could say more.

It was clear that Koltz couldn’t keep running. If Ritz could buy just a bit of time, then Koltz could invoke a large spell—and perhaps that would accomplish *something*. The chances of success were slim, however, and that wasn’t a bet Loren was willing to take.

“But at this rate...”

Suddenly, Gula intruded upon the conversation. “If you’re willing to go with those terrible odds, why not take a bet on me?”

“Meaning?”

“Well, you’ve got to put in a bit more legwork. Keep running, slowly counting to three hundred, and I’ll try something.”

She didn’t say anything more specific. However, no one else had any ideas. Ritz immediately made the call and barked orders to Nym and Chuck, who were still supporting Koltz.

“For the next three hundred seconds, run like your life depends on it!”

“What sort of order is that?!”

“Shut up, Chuck.”

If you have time to talk, then get running, Nym’s words seemed to imply. Chuck shut his mouth and ran, a desperate look on his face. Ritz ran just as desperately with Diggs, and Loren matched pace with Lapis under one arm.

“You done yet, Gula?!”

“Hmm, a bit more. Should be about time. I hope.”

She didn't seem to be doing anything in particular. Before Loren knew it, she was running at the rear of the party, frequently glancing over her shoulder. If her plan didn't take, they would be tapped of their strength and be swallowed up by spiders. *Does she understand that?* Loren wondered.

Then he realized that the sound of arachnid pursuit had suddenly grown muted.

"Eh? Huh?"

The others seemed to pick up on this as well. After frantically running for so long, they slowly eased their pace, looked back, and finally came to a stop. Loren joined them, setting Lapis down in the process.

"Looks like it worked," Gula said, sounding satisfied with a hand on her hip.

Their eyes were locked on the still countless spiders. All those beasts had energetically given chase, yet for some reason, they had halted. Their legs were curled up, immobile, as if they had dropped dead on the spot.

"What did you do?" Loren asked, unable to believe what he was seeing.

They were saved, but he would feel unsteady until he knew how. Before that, it just wouldn't feel real to him.

"Hmm, I don't really want to say." Gula awkwardly scratched her head as she turned to Loren. But that didn't help. His eyes continued urging her to explain. "I just used a bit of magic. As for what spell I cast and how, well, I'd like to keep my trump card a secret."

That would be the official reason. After announcing this, Gula slung an arm around Loren's neck, pulling him aside to whisper the real explanation. "Spiders have an inefficient respiratory system, see."

"I don't follow."

"To put it simply, you can lock 'em down pretty easily with certain gasses—the amount's fine for humans, but it takes 'em right out."

"Gas... Don't tell me you..."

Taking care not to raise his voice, Loren instinctively glanced at the countless spiders behind them. Gula seemed to be saying that she had somehow filled the

tunnel with poisonous gas. If that was the case, wouldn't they be at risk of being affected if they lingered?

We need to get out of here fast, he thought.

But Gula waved her free hand dismissively. "I'm not gonna use poison in an enclosed space. That'd put us all in danger."

"Then what did you throw at them?"

The substance that immobilized the spiders couldn't be harmless. It had to be at least related to poison. Yet for some reason, Gula was stumbling over her words.

"Don't tell me...you used something so vile you can't even say it?!" he hissed.

"N-not exactly. But it's not the coolest..."

"C'mon, out with it."

"Err, I'm Gluttony, right? And when I eat, all sorts of things get produced, right? And among them, there's this thing that's generally harmless to humans..."

"Gaseous, right? Not solid or liquid?"

"What did you just imagine...? No, don't say it. I'll kill you if you say it."

Gula released his head only to grab his collar and shake him back and forth. Even as she shook him, Loren still didn't fully grasp what she had done. He did know that now that their pursuers were incapacitated, they had to leave.

They abandoned the spiders and moved on. Those that had to be carried would now have to walk on their own two feet.

Although Chuck insisted that the immobile spiders should be burned, Loren and Nym were opposed.

"You trying to suffocate us? Using fire in this enclosed space?"

"Spiders are a part of the natural cycle. We shouldn't kill them if we can avoid it. More importantly, they are not edible."

Of course, Loren understood why Chuck would want to let off some steam after they had been chased for so long, but if it would worsen their situation in the process, it was a no go.

“Good grief. That should be the end of them, right?” Once he had regained his cool, Chuck understood that his fire-based revenge fantasy was pointless. He quickly gave up and began moving, though he cursed all the way.

“Of course not,” Nym said plainly. “The next ones will be here soon.”

“Next ones...”

“Those are probably on the large side for dire spider nymphs. The parent must be somewhere near.”

Elves generally lived in forests, and as a race they were known to harbor deep respect for the expanse of nature. As such, Nym was knowledgeable on the matter, and her insights left everyone agape.

Every individual spider that had chased them had been as tall as Lapis. Understandably, they had believed the creatures were adults. But if these were effectively infants, they didn’t want to think about how big the adult was.

“Adult dire spiders are several times the size of the juveniles. Their threads are also thicker. They are exceptionally dangerous.”

“How can something like that move around these tunnels...? Well, I guess they can, given the size of this place.”

Although the dire spider had to be massive, these tunnels were far larger than typical ones. Even a spider as large as Nym described would be able to move around with ease.

“Why did the dwarves dig something so idiotically large?” Chuck grumbled.

Diggs shamelessly stuck out his chest. “If there’s ore, you’ve gotta dig for it.”

Normally, the group would have thought nothing of it, but at present his attitude was strangely irritating. Everyone averted their eyes from the old dwarf.

“If there’s a parent, does that mean we’re gonna end up running again?” said Chuck. He already sounded fed up as he recalled their mad dash to get there.

Ritz nodded a few times, sharing the sentiment.

Although Nym looked composed, Koltz had a dark expression. He knew he would only be baggage if they had to make another break for it.

“No, I don’t think we’ll be running,” said Gula.

“Quite right,” Lapis agreed. “There’s something else you should expect from a dire spider.”

“Oh... You have a point.” Nym clapped her hands together, seemingly realizing something.

That was ominous as all get out. Even so, Loren knew he had to understand it for himself, and asked Lapis, as she was the best at explaining herself. “What do you mean?”

“Dire spider nymphs shoot threads and chase prey, as you saw before. The adults instead weave webs like normal spiders.”

As they were walking, they spotted a point ahead where the tunnel suddenly widened. It was like the grand hall of a palace, and despite his apprehensions, Loren proceeded, only to stop his feet before he took his first step into the hall. His eyes were fixed on what occupied the space before him.

“Oh yes, just like that...” said Lapis.

The wide area had presumably been excavated due in pursuit of a large ore deposit. Its height and breadth were incomparable to those of the previous corridors. The lantern light revealed a pure-white mass that completely dominated this massive space.

“This thing?”

“That’s probably the nest.”

I’ll bet, Loren thought, though he’d hoped it wasn’t so. Lapis didn’t sugarcoat things. Not that doing so would change the reality of the matter. But it didn’t feel great to have his faint hopes so quickly dashed.

“It’s practically a small mountain here,” Ritz said, looking up at it.

The nest was like a cylinder woven from thread upon thread. It was widest at

the base, where it covered nearly the entire floor.

“What do we do about this?” he muttered.

“Charging in doesn’t sit right with me. How about we burn it?”

Chuck’s proposal was met with a grimace from Lapis and a sigh from Nym. He drew back, wondering why he was being persecuted when Loren put a hand on his shoulder.

“Spider thread doesn’t burn.”

“Huh?”

Was it really that surprising? Chuck let out a strange voice as his eyes widened, but everyone apart from the thief seemed aware of this. They nodded, not particularly surprised.

“We call ’em threads, so it’s easy to misunderstand, but spider threads are like hardened body fluid. You can burn through ’em, but they don’t catch fire.”

“Wait, what?”

“Sometimes dust and bug corpses stick to the webs—that stuff does burn. But the threads themselves don’t.”

Wasn’t that a good lesson? Loren thought as he continued patting Chuck’s shoulders.

Nym glanced at them before picking up the thread, so to speak: “There is only one road. There are no other ways out.”

“Meaning we need to get through here somehow.” Ritz glanced at Diggs to confirm this.

The dwarf gave a heavy nod.

“How about we use Ms. Gula’s trump card again?” Koltz asked—after all, Gula had taken out an entire horde of spiders with her special technique.

Gula shook her head. “Once I let it out, it takes a lot of time before I can use it again.”

Loren could think of only one gas that came from food, but if he mentioned it, he expected Gula would find an even more embarrassing way to end him. If it

was what he was imagining, it certainly would take time to refill her tank.

“Can we sneak through?” Nym proposed.

Even if they wanted to, the nest covered nearly all of the space ahead of them. It didn’t seem possible to make it through without touching a single thread.

“Spiders locate their prey by using the vibrations of their web,” said Nym. “If we walk without shaking it, they won’t notice us.”

“Hey, now, your elf just said something crazy,” Loren told Ritz, who shrugged his shoulders.

Elves were light on their feet and masters of acrobatics. Perhaps a team of elves could pull off the feat Nym suggested. However, Loren and Ritz had trained as swordsmen; their muscle added a good deal of weight. Koltz’s elderly untrained legs were failing him, and he clearly couldn’t keep up with elf agility either. On top of that, there was poor Diggs. He didn’t even consider Nym’s proposal.

“With a nest this large, I think we can manage as long as we’re careful,” Nym plainly stated. “The massive size means there’s a lot of weight on each individual thread. Walking on taut threads won’t shake them.”

“Are you certain?” Ritz seemed less than convinced, but there was only one way back—through the area where Gula had immobilized the spiders.

Ahead was a spider nest. Behind, a spider army. Both seemed just as dangerous as the other, and after thinking a bit, Ritz decided to press on.

“If both ways are equally risky, we should move forward.”

“Well, yeah. If all goes well, we can get through without alerting them.”

They weren’t too hopeful. But if Nym was right and they could sneak through without encountering spiders, this was technically the least perilous option.

“The cross-weft threads are the sticky ones meant to catch prey,” Nym said with all seriousness. “The lengthwise warps don’t stick. Always step on vertical threads.”

However, looking up at the towering cylinder, it was unclear which ones were

warps and which were wefts. Perhaps Nym could tell—everyone’s eyes focused on her.

“Put your feet on them,” she explained nonchalantly. “The ones that don’t stick are warps.”

“Isn’t it over the moment they stick?!” Ritz retorted. That was far too straightforward.

Nym clicked her tongue and waved her index finger. “Pull your foot back before it sticks hard.”

This was possible only for the light-footed elves. Heavy dwarves and armored humans would have trouble employing this method.

“Can you suggest something the rest of us can do?” Loren bitterly pleaded.

After thinking a bit, Nym began piecing together her thoughts. “We aren’t climbing the nest, so...it should be relatively safe. These support threads shouldn’t be sticky... I don’t think.”

“So ultimately, we have to tread lightly without touching the main body of the nest,” Loren offered in summary, and Nym nodded.

Ritz looked up at the ceiling with a sigh, while Diggs and Koltz locked hands, staring pale-faced at the nest they were about to set foot upon.

Loren looked to Lapis and Gula, who looked just as calm as usual. If worse came to worst, at least those two could blow the entire nest sky-high.

The soundless walking came naturally to Chuck the thief and Nym the hunter. Loren and Ritz also mastered it to a degree.

But only a degree.

The threads that formed the spider nest stretched over the walls, floor, and ceiling, and everything in between. Luckily the threads flat against the floor didn’t shake when they stepped on them. The problems were the ones slightly suspended above it. These threads shook no matter what Loren and Ritz did.

Of course, what Loren and Ritz couldn’t manage, Koltz and Diggs couldn’t

either. The four of them feverishly scanned for suspended threads, nervously inching forward.

By contrast, Nym, Chuck, Lapis, and Gula moved with relative ease. None of them seemed to think too hard about where they stepped. They moved briskly and without hesitation through the spider's den.

"Hey now, Loren. Get goin', would ya? We're gonna leave you behind," Gula called.

But considering the spiders that would flood from the nest should he step on a single wrong thread, he couldn't go any faster.

"You shouldn't rush him, Ms. Gula. The spiders in this tunnel are used to hunting in dim light. They're especially sensitive to vibrations and sound."

Lapis explained that dire spiders had poor vision. To compensate, they had developed keen hearing organs and touch receptors on their feet. It was through the vibrations of their webbing and the detection of faint noise that they determined the number and location of their prey.

"If we do end up fighting, we'll see spiders in every direction."

"Wouldn't want that. Let's get out of here already," Gula said as she turned.

Then the wall near Gula's hip shifted ever so slightly.

The cave walls were coated in a thick layer of spider silk, but there were stone walls beyond them. Surely there shouldn't be moving—but what else was there? Diggs and Koltz watched fretfully as they pondered the matter. They had somehow gotten in front of Loren and Ritz and were on Gula's heels; the wall had caught their attention as Gula passed it.

"Hey, don't stop..." Ritz chided, only to be interrupted as the wall split in two.

What appeared was what had once been a spider's meal, preserved between thread and wall. The body was half-desiccated. Spider nymphs the size of a pinky spilled from its hollow eye sockets and over the ground.

There was no way this victim could still be alive, yet it had appeared as if begging for someone to save it. Its hand unluckily reached toward Koltz.

It lurched so suddenly that the old magician was taken by surprise. Diggs

managed to hold his ground, but Koltz stumbled back from the hand. His feet were caught by a thread, sending him tumbling backward into Ritz behind him.

Ritz would usually have been able to catch him, but he hadn't expected this and was late to react. The two fell backward together, straight into the main bulk of the nest.

"Hey, are you all right?" Loren reached a hand toward them as his blade sliced through the victim's neck.

There was a dry sound. Countless small spiders flooded out of the body's cross-section and every other hole on the rolling head.

"The hell was that?!"

"The spiders planted eggs in the body. He turned undead as he was eaten from the inside out."

Loren kicked the body, which moved even without a head, crushing a few small spiders underfoot.

The situation had taken a turn for the worse.

More dried bodies of other ones began shambling out of the tear in the wall that had birthed the first victim. Worse yet, Ritz and Koltz had shaken the nest. The parent spiders now knew where they were.

The adult dire spiders that emerged from all over were certainly far larger than the ones the party had previously encountered.

"We're in trouble now," Loren spat as he brought a fist down on the headless, still-moving body. It would have splattered blood, but the spiders had devoured all the juices within it. With every blow, nothing but tiny spiders emerged.

"Don't cut the victims! You'll just increase the number of spiders we have to deal with!"

"But they're trying to grab us!" Ritz lifted Koltz as he smacked an approaching victim with his shield. Its poor, undead body was in no state to take the blow, and its chest caved in as a great gout of spider nymphs poured from its mouth.

These nymphs began skittering up Ritz and Koltz, starting with their feet. Foul liquids splattered everywhere as they were squashed.

“There are too many of them!”

If cutting and smacking were both out, they had no way to deal with the undead. The magic-users could burn the nymphs with magic, but Loren and the other stragglers were already too closely entangled with the undead bodies and would be at risk of getting caught in the blaze.

“The adults are troublesome too,” Nym muttered as she unleashed an arrow.

The arrow sliced through the air, accurately piercing an adult spider’s head. This was a fatal blow. Unable to hold onto the nest any longer, the massive beast came hurtling down.

“Crap! Dodge it!”

Everyone scattered at Chuck’s warning to avoid the falling body, but the beast was massive. A slight shift wasn’t enough to evade it—they had no choice but to run. A moment later, the adult dire spider crushed several of the old victims and nymphs, splattering the white thread walls in blue.

“There’s more of them!” Diggs said, not that he had to. Everyone was aware of the massive dire spiders on the hunt.

There were roughly ten of them. Some would say that was only a few, others would say that was a lot, but if it was ten *massive dire spiders*, each several times the size of a human, they were threatening either way. The second they gave chase, the party had no time to ponder such brain teasers.

“Run!”

With spider threads in every direction, Loren didn’t think he could move faster than the very spiders who had laid them. But it was true he had no other options than to make a break for it. Sure, he was strong, and his weapon boasted an incredible cutting edge. He could take on one or two of the monsters, but he couldn’t keep ten massive spiders occupied all on his own.

Even if they had no chance, they had to try and make a straight shot for the exit—

At which point the path was cut off by what had become of the spider nest’s victims. Their flesh was filled with growing spider nymphs, and their

troublesome undead bodies tore through the webbing, clawing forward wherever they were least desired.

“Turn Undead!”

“Wait, Lapis!”

The moment the undead blocked her way, Lapis immediately invoked *Turn Undead*. She used it before Loren could stop her. The obstructing undead were lit by a holy light and turned to dust.

Perhaps these undead were grateful for her blessings, for they faded without any further resistance. Lapis had a triumphant look on her face, but her expression soon stiffened.

The bodies had been undead. What had writhed inside them was not. Countless spider nymphs scattered across the ground amid the ashes.

“H-huh?” Lapis balked, head tilted quizzically.

“Don’t stop! Trample them!” Loren scolded as he measured the distance to the adult spiders.

It was psychologically excruciating to run over a carpet of spiders. They were so plentiful that nowhere was safe to step. Several spiders popped with every footfall. Even so, as obstacles went, they were easier to surmount than corpses.

“I’m going, I’m going! Wait, there’s a popping! I feel a popping beneath my feet!”

“Deal with it! Better than being bitten by those things!”

The intense menace of the encroaching dire spiders had Lapis half in tears. But even as she ran with all her might, she couldn’t ignore the grotesque smashing sensation.

Neither Ritz’s party nor Diggs seemed especially bothered. They ran without a fuss, and Loren took the rear again with frequent glances back. He clicked his tongue.

No matter how he looked at it, the spiders were gaining on them. Their vanguard hadn’t reached the exit, and they still had to deal with the occasional undead that sprung up. On top of that, they had to trample over the spider

nymphs that scurried up from the ashes. At this rate, the adults would catch up to them.

That was when he heard Scena's voice.

«I might be able to do something about these numbers,» she said.

Loren pleaded to her to drain the adult spiders' energy—but not to the degree that it would kill them. Scena didn't quite understand why, but she trusted that Loren had some sort of plan. She began to use her energy drain, but she kept it at the level he'd requested.

"Their movements are dulled! They must be tiring!" There was joy in Ritz's voice when he noticed the change.

In truth, this game of chase couldn't hope to expend their monstrous stamina. Scena's energy drain was beginning to exhibit its effects, inducing lethargy in the spiders whose life forces had been absorbed.

«Are you sure you don't want to kill them?»

No matter how massive these spiders were, these were still only spiders. They weren't resistant to a Lifeless King's energy drain, and Scena could kill them all the moment she wished to.

But Loren had his reasons. It would be suspicious as hell if the spiders chasing them suddenly died. Sure, Ritz's party wouldn't immediately connect this abnormality to Loren, but he didn't want to stoke their fears without reason.

On top of that, those killed by a Lifeless King's energy drain became undead themselves. Loren didn't know whether this applied to spiders—that would be a matter of trial and error—but if it did, the results would be downright uncanny.

«But then they'd be under my control. I don't think you have to worry about that.»

Yeah, well, even if the spiders suddenly became zombified, there'd clearly still be something weird going on. If they stopped attacking, Ritz's party would know something was wrong.

«What a pain... But I guess I was useful, so let's leave it at that,» Scena said

with a laugh as Loren mentally offered her his heartfelt gratitude.

Chapter 6:

The Passage to Understanding

“DID WE MAKE IT?” Ritz asked.

No one replied.

They were exhausted from all the running, but the real issue was that they were speechless, still processing the horror they had just escaped.

“That was terrible.”

Worst off was Lapis. She wore white priest vestments that were easy to stain even in ordinary circumstances. Now her clothes were smeared with tacky threads that had picked up all manner of filth in turn. The fragments and fluids of all the spiders she trampled as she ran had left their mark in sprays of color, and some parts of her were now dyed completely new hues.

Loren was of the opinion that if she didn't want to get dirty, she needed a new outfit. But Lapis was always adamant about sticking to her proper uniform. “It's not just about the design,” she'd say. “What sort of priest would I be without my vestments?”

For some reason that Loren couldn't understand, she refused to back down on the matter. But even if he didn't get it, he respected her opinion. After all, she was the one who had to put up with the filth.

It wasn't like anyone else's clothes were any better off. Oddly enough, Gula was the least affected. With all her exposed skin, Loren had expected there to be far more fluids and threads stuck to her. But as Loren and the others fastidiously wiped their clothes clean, Gula seemed untouched. Even Nym, whose race was known for their fleet feet, had ended up with terribly sullied boots.

Ritz's party thus murmured that Gula must be one of the most dexterous people they knew. Loren alone saw it differently.

“You ate them, didn't you?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

Gula played dumb, but it was obvious. If she had suffered hardly any repercussions from trampling over the spiders, she had definitely used her dark god authority in secret.

“You absolutely ate them. Must’ve been vile.”

Gula’s authority generally related to consumption. When the other party members were caught up with the dire spiders and their nymphs, Gula must have used her Predator ability to devour the spiders just below her own feet to ensure she had a path forward.

“As I said, I’ve got no clue what you’re on about. By the way, Loren. Do you believe that story about spiders tasting like foreign sweets from southern lands?”

“Never heard of it,” Loren bluntly replied.

“We’re not out of the tunnel just yet,” Ritz chided. “Keep the chatter to a minimum.”

Loren and Gula obediently shut their mouths. Sure enough, escaping was still the priority—and there was more than that to worry about.

“We ran through so many of the little ones. It wouldn’t be a surprise if some snuck under your clothes, so keep an eye out.”

The larger nymphs weren’t difficult to spot and eliminate. However, the smaller ones, which had carpeted the entire floor, could slip through the slightest gap. It was rather difficult to detect them once they’d disappeared.

Lapis assured them all that dire spiders couldn’t lay eggs until they reached full maturity and size, so these nymphs wouldn’t be injecting eggs into their bodies. It was nevertheless uncanny to think spiders might be hidden in their clothing. As they walked, they smacked their palms against wherever felt off on their own flesh, just to make sure they were in the clear.

“It’s nice that you don’t have to worry, Ms. Gula. There’s nowhere to hide in those clothes of yours,” Lapis enviously muttered. With all the skin Gula boldly displayed, any spider trying to hide in her clothes would be out of luck.

“And you got it rough, Lapis,” said Gula. “There are all sorts of hidey-holes in that uniform of yours. Hey, I’ll check for you. Stand still for a second.”

Gula took Lapis by the hand, drew her close, and suddenly thrust her hands into all the curves and folds of her garments. She acted before Lapis could stop her, but the execution was so skillful that she couldn’t reject her either. For a moment, she was frozen, taken aback. Once she regained herself, she hurriedly pushed Gula’s hands away.

“Hey! Ms. Gula!”

“Yeah, yeah, leave it to me. You’ve got a lot of gaps, Lapis. I’ll give you a thorough inspection and find every last one.”

“Where are you sticking your hands?! I’d notice if there were any spiders in there!”

“Nah, nah, nah, they’re stealthy little things, they are.”

Gula embraced Lapis from behind, holding her steady as she probed her clothes.

These actions naturally drew the attention of Ritz and Chuck.

“Wait...huh?” Lapis muttered. “Err, as I said, there’s no way they could have gotten in—”

“You like it here? How about here?”

“Eep?! Where are you touching?!”

“It’s just between us girls. What’s there to lose?”

“Quit it! I might not lose anything tangible, but I stand to lose something more important than that!”



What's she losing, exactly? Loren thought as he did his best not to look in that general direction.

At roughly the same time, Chuck received a scathing kick. "Oww!"

"You have the eyes of a criminal."

"I'm not *that* bad!" Chuck protested, immediately back on his feet. But after Nym gave him a displeased glare, he summoned no further words of protest. After a few muttered excuses, he went silent.

"You need a checkup too, Nym?"

"No need," Nym sulkily said as Gula's attention turned to her. The dark god was closing in.

Lapis took the opportunity to duck away. Her face was red, and she dove behind Loren, using him as a shield just in case Gula came back for round two.

"Don't be like that. You've got a lot of frills, Nym..."

Perfectly undeterred by the rejection, Gula continued drawing closer to closer. Nym assumed a battle stance, but after Gula swept her eyes up and down Nym's figure, for some reason, her smile vanished. She lowered her hands.

"What?" Nym was flustered by this sudden change.

Gula's voice took on a bit of pity. "Well, ya see, with those clothes, I can tell even without checking."

"Wait. What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you don't look like you've got the gals to hide even the itsy-bitsiest spider."

Gula's words trained everyone's attention on Nym. She wore clothes suited to the mobility a hunter needed, but still with crevices where spiders could hide. However, Nym boasted a classic elven physique, and therefore had fewer natural gaps than someone like Lapis. The group seemed to agree that Gula's appraisal was spot on.

"Do I detect some uncalled-for judgment?" Nym asked, sullenly glaring.

Ritz and Loren averted their gaze. Koltz and Diggs were, for some reason, sending her smiles filled with warmth. Gula stared off into the distance, while Lapis concealed her line of sight by hiding behind Loren.

Only Chuck continued looking at Nym. He finally mustered an understanding murmur, "I see..."

In that instant, Nym's right leg rose at astounding speed and angle, after which it came crashing down on Chuck's temple. He couldn't even make a sound. As he fell, and Loren and Ritz stared at him with tired eyes, Nym was red to the tips of her pointed ears. She showered the immobile thief with insults and jeers, and by then, no one was stopping her.

"What's up with them?" Loren asked Ritz.

"Don't ask," Ritz closed his eyes, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Loren didn't intend to ask anyone to air their party's dirty laundry, so he patted Ritz on the shoulder to convey his understanding.

It was hard to get Nym moving now that the blood had rushed to her head.

We'll have to let her cool down for a bit, Loren thought. He remained on the lookout, fearing spiders might attack during this pause. Then Lapis's eyes stopped on something, and she let out a light shriek.

"What?"

"O-on your shoulder, Mr. Loren..."

Her voice quavered as she gestured at his right shoulder. Diggs and Koltz followed her frantic pointing and both swallowed their breath.

What's got them so worked up? Loren tried to brush whatever it was away. A hard sensation met his fingertips and he quickly drew back his hand. "Wait, is it..."

"You've got one of them spiders on you."

Knew it, Loren thought as he glanced over. It was sitting right there, around the shoulder blade of his jacket: a palm-sized spider with all eight of its legs firmly grasping the leather.

It wasn't too comforting to look at, but neither did it seem intent on biting him. The spider stared fixedly at Loren, and though he tried poking it off, it refused to budge. It was as if it was insisting that his shoulder was its new home.

"Is this a dire spider nymph?"

"Err, it seems a little different."

Now that Lapis mentioned it, this one did look somewhat different from the ones they'd just been chased by. The dire spiders sported long, slender limbs, but the one on Loren's shoulders was stouter, and its legs were short and thick.

The spider's black body glimmered like obsidian, and it had eight crimson eyes that looked like rubies. Loren tried poking a little more forcefully, but the spider still wouldn't move.

"I'd hate to think this was the case, but did this thing take a liking to me or something?"

"A spider? Are there any spiders that take to humans?" Lapis asked in turn.

Loren certainly didn't know the answer. He awkwardly continued prodding at it until Nym, who had finished lambasting Chuck, noticed something was up. She brought her face near to the spider stuck to Loren's shoulder.

"That is most likely a fully mature obsidian spider. How rare."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Not really. They tend to gravitate to strong entities and use them for transport."

The spider had an incredibly hard exterior, as well as venom. However, this was generally not used for offensive purposes. Obsidian spiders were scavengers who fed on the leftovers that their stronger rides provided.

"They can produce web, and they have power of their own. Their reliance on other lifeforms is a bit of a mystery."

"It's not going to plant its eggs in me, is it?"

The sight of those past victims still haunted Loren. He had zero desire to share

their fate.

Nym shook her head. “This species produces only one egg at a time. Also, this one is probably male.”

“And it’s got a real grip too...”

After much prodding, Loren tried to use all his strength to remove the beast, but its legs clung firmly to the surface of his jacket. He gave it several heaves before finally giving up.

“Fine. Guess it should be all right if it doesn’t bite.”

“It does look like an accessory, in a sense.”

As long as the obsidian spider didn’t move, its lustrous black carapace paired well with the jacket’s hue. It could even pass as an intentional element of the design.

Letting out a sigh, Loren lightly flicked its head. *Don’t you go getting in my way.* Although it couldn’t possibly have sensed his intentions, the spider stirred ever so slightly, then returned to utter stillness.

Once they had made it through the nest, the party proceeded with a degree of ease. They had to deal with the sporadic undead and dire spider attack, but Ritz’s party intercepted and eliminated all comers without issue.

“As expected of a silver-rank party,” Loren mused. He had barely lifted a hand himself.

“I don’t know why,” Ritz replied with a wry smile, “but that doesn’t sound like a compliment, coming from you.”

Even if they only showed up one by one, the dire spiders were formidable foes, owing to their massive bulk, projectile threads, and the venom in their bite. However, Ritz and Chuck dealt with each foe in a workman-like manner.

“We don’t have time to strip materials from them,” Chuck grumbled as he stood before the corpse of one of the many dire spiders.

“What part of the spiders count as materials?” Loren asked for future

reference.

“The carapace, the venom gland, and the web sack.”

“What’s the web sack?”

“It’s the organ that contains the liquid that becomes thread once they shoot it out. I don’t know the official name. I could tear it open to show you, but if we stick around, the next one will show up.”

Chuck explained that the carapace could be used to make armor, while the venom gland had medicinal uses. The contents of the web sack were used to make various textiles. In the case of dire spiders, their sack was comparatively small for their size and didn’t produce much. The scarcity made it decently valuable.

“We might want to collect some on the way back.”

“Come to think of it, what are we doing about that?”

Loren and Ritz’s parties were operating together by chance, but they were pursuing separate objectives. Had Loren’s party come for the sole purpose of surveying demon territory, they could have worked together a while longer. However, in their case, the quest was merely an excuse to visit Lapis’s home.

“We’re gonna head a bit farther into demon territory...” Ritz said. “What are you guys planning to do?”

“We’ll loiter around the edge. We’d rather avoid going too far in,” Loren answered, thinking that was the safest response an iron could give.

Ritz nodded. “Then we’ll be operating separately once we’re out of the tunnel, but...”

He trailed off and Loren looked at him curiously. But Ritz’s eyes were on Diggs.

Ritz lowered his voice and told Loren, “There used to be a dwarf settlement on the other side. That’s where we would find a guide to take us back, but...”

“Given the circumstances, it’s unlikely that settlement is still in one piece.”

There were so many spiders in the tunnel that it was hard to believe they’d

bred solely within it. And they couldn't have maintained their population size if they were only devouring every soul unfortunate enough to pass through. If the dwarves were safe on one side of the mountains, there was a high chance the other side had become spider feed.

"Although there's a chance they're all right, if there's some other big game lurking here for the spiders to munch on," Loren said, though this was pretty optimistic. The dwarves would have noticed something like that in their own mines.

"Pretty much."

"I guess so."

"So I was wondering if you could leave Diggs with us," said Ritz.

Loren didn't know whether to be grateful for this proposition. Diggs's role was to guide them through the dwarven tunnels. As his party would have to pass through those tunnels again to return to human lands, they'd need to have someone like him around.

But their current destination was Lapis's home. There was no telling what would happen if Diggs was to accompany them there, and Loren wasn't keen on finding out.

It would therefore be a relief if Ritz's party could take him off their hands, even if that left the trouble of finding a new way home. He wondered what he should say as Ritz went on, seemingly having thought of this.

"We'll return from our information gathering in two days, and we'll wait near the entrance for one more day after. If you happen to survive out there for three days, we'll pick you up on the way home."

"I see."

Loren turned to Lapis, seeking her opinion. He didn't know where her home was; she was the only one who knew if three days would get them there and back.

"It should be fine, right?" Lapis said as if it was nothing.

Welp, it seemed it would work out. Loren nodded. "We'll go with that, then."

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. As long as you’re still kicking by then, we’ll find you.”

Loren decided to let himself be comforted by those words. His own party had no thief; conversely, Ritz had Chuck and Nym as thief and hunter. Their party far surpassed Loren’s when it came to searching and exploration.

“Only if we make it out of here safely, that is,” Chuck barged into the conversation. He’d stopped a little farther down, signaling everyone else to stop with him. With a grim face, he jerked his thumb down the corridor. “Something’s there.”

“And something big at that,” Nym added, her ears perked up.

Diggs’s expression turned startled. “There’s a large work area past here.”

Near the tunnel entrance on the demon side of the mountains, there was a large area where the dwarves did uncomplicated work; it was largely for gathering materials and supplies. That meant as long as their group could get through, it wasn’t far from the exit.

Yet something was there.

“What is it?” Loren asked Nym and Chuck, who were peeking around the corner while taking care not to let the lantern light leak out.

“Dunno. But it’s pretty big.”

“Its footsteps are heavy.”

Considering all the spiders they had run into, there was a chance that this was an even bigger one. If it was something else, there were far too many possibilities to bother guessing.

“Is there enough space for something that big?”

Massive as this open area might be, the thing ahead would still need to use the tunnels to move around. The dire spiders could navigate the tunnels, but the way Nym and Chuck were muttering, something else seemed to be afoot.

“Maybe it grew larger after it settled there?”

Who knew what this thing ate? But if it couldn’t leave the grand tunnel, it

couldn't hunt for food outside. With so few people passing through, it was fated to starve to death.

Loren felt a touch of pity at the thought until Gula said, "It's not wanting for food as long as it eats spiders."

The other spiders could leave the tunnel and hunt outside. If this thing preyed on them, it certainly wouldn't need to leave itself.

"This is getting troublesome."

If the tunnel was under complete spider control, the area around its entrance had to be their hunting ground. Thus the surrounding lands had most likely been devastated. Given time, these spiders would flood out of the other end as well. This was turning into quite a dangerous situation.

"We'll need to think of some way to get rid of them, or your settlement is doomed."

"Hrmph... I'll have to consider sending a quest to the guild."

Though dwarves built individual settlements, they didn't coordinate in organizations, per se. And though they fought back against any who attacked them, they never formed anything like an army of their own. Thus, when they needed the strength of an organization, they had to rely on outside sources—or at least, that was what Lapis quietly explained to Loren.

"They don't have proper nations. Once the tunnels run dry, they simply move on."

"So the tunnels here still have decent yield, I guess."

"The mountain is healthy, so I doubt they'll run dry soon."

Loren looked at her, surprised, not understanding what she meant.

"Dwarves excavate any and all ores they sniff out. In most cases, by the time the veins run dry, the mountain crumbles in their wake."

"What a troublesome race..."

"In the worst cases, the mountains wind up as basins."

"So they go below the ground too..."

In any case, it was dwarven nature to keep digging as long as there were ores to be found. They would dig until the range protecting demon territory was leveled. Only then would they decide there was nothing left to find.

“Are they stupid?”

“Now, now. At present, the massive thing ahead of us is more important than dwarf customs,” Lapis said to pacify him. She glanced at Nym and Chuck, who had inched a little farther down.

Once the pair returned, they reported what they saw.

“Yep, it’s a stupidly huge spider. Probably gray, but the lighting’s pretty bad. It’s got threads hanging like curtains at the center of the work area.”

“I believe it is an evolved form of the dire spider. It will be difficult to pass it without being spotted.”

Ritz had an unpleasant look on his face as he surveyed his party members. “No way around it, then. We’ll have to murder our way out. Any objections?”

No one would voice an objection without an alternative plan that would let them sneak past undetected. No one had any such idea. Ritz had the right of it. Everyone exchanged looks before summoning their resolve.

“Lightning!”

First, Koltz fired his magic to secure a field of view. A strong white glimmer enveloped the ceiling. He had poured a good bit of strength into the spell, and even the farthest corners were dimly lit.

After that, it was Nym who fired the first shot. She had the most range and could move the fastest. The first arrow coincided with Loren and Ritz’s charge. The bolt tore through the air and stabbed into the spider that filled the massive space.

Given the distance, Nym’s skill, and the enemy’s size, missing was out of the question. Unfortunately, her arrow only left a shallow scratch on the surface of its exoskeleton. There was a sharp sound as it pinged off.

“It’s hard,” Nym said with a frown.

Not long ago, she had managed to deal with adult dire spiders. Those were large in their own right, but the monster whose attention she'd just drawn with her arrow—who had slowly begun moving toward their vanguard—was three or four times larger.

It was as if they faced a lumbering hill. Nym nearly faltered as Koltz and Gula came up beside her. The distance was still too great for them to attack.

"We'll fire together!"

"No helping it, then. On your count!"

Koltz pointed with the tip of his staff. Gula held up her palm. Matching their timing, they chanted their spells in unison:

"O shot of red, pierce through my foe! *Fire Bullet!*"

Two red bolts passed over Loren's head and stabbed into the massive spider, scattering into flames upon impact. Once the flames had cleared, Koltz opened his eyes wide and Gula listlessly brushed her hair from her eyes.

"It didn't leave a scratch."

They'd left no burn marks on its carapace. It was like the spider didn't even feel it as it continued inching closer to Loren.

"Can we beat it?" asked Chuck. He wasn't on the front line with the other close-range fighters, and for the time being was on standby. While their vanguard fought, he would flank the spider to attack from any direction it wasn't facing. However, though they had thus far just been testing the waters, the spider had shrugged off everything they threw at it, and Chuck was beginning to get nervous.

Lapis, who wasn't meant to participate in the battle and was instead overlooking it, answered bluntly, "I imagine we can."

"How so?"

"Perhaps we'll have to keep whittling it down the usual way. It's large, and its sturdy carapace blocks most attacks, but Mr. Loren is most capable..."

Lapis's attention was on Loren, who had just made contact. That was the moment when the spider turned to face him and Ritz, and the two swordsmen

launched their first attack.

Ritz's longsword, which he swung with a loud cry, sunk into the spider's armored leg. But it only dented the shell, failing to reach the organs beneath.

By contrast, Loren's swing was soundless, and his hands hardly met any resistance as the blade sliced through the carapace, inflicting a deep wound on the spider's leg.

Suddenly, the area echoed with the sound of scraping metal. The spider, which had to that point moved sluggishly, leapt back with a nimble speed belied by its bulk.

Before Loren realized that the sound had been the beast's cry, the spider charged at Loren. He evaded, slashing at another leg as the beast whizzed by.

"Too shallow," Loren muttered as the force of the spider's charge sent it careening into the wall.

Loren's greatsword had previously managed to slice through the stone floor. It could sever this spider's carapace like butter. But Loren knew he was done for if he was caught in the spider's charge, and he was unable to get too close when it shot forward. Moreover, the wound he had inflicted was far shallower than he'd hoped.

"I'm surprised you can cut something that hard..." Ritz said.

"I found myself a good weapon," Loren replied. In the next instant, he was leaping to the side.

Ritz jumped a beat behind. The spot where he had just stood was splattered with viscous white goop.

This was the spider's liquid binder. The monster stuck its head into the wall and aimed its behind at the frontline fighters. The thing that shot from the end of its abdomen wasn't in the form of the usual long, thin threads; it was the same substance that had been hardened, condensed, and fired like a bullet.

It was all too easy to imagine what would happen should one of those projectiles collide with a human body. Blunt force trauma aside, it would at least hamper their movement. Worst-case scenario, it would cement them to

the ground, preventing them from moving an inch.

Likewise, the liquid on the ground maintained its adhesive properties, and it would trap any foot that stepped on it.

What a troublesome attack. Loren clicked his tongue. He watched as the spider pulled itself loose from the wall—then for some reason, slammed its head back in.

An enormous sound and impact reverberated through the cave. Loren tried to figure out what it intended, then sensed the spider's intent.

The curtain of countless threads shook. Something rattled in the ceiling, then fell toward the party. Bodies. They tumbled limply from a considerable height and cracked on impact, but regardless, they staggered up. Groans raised like the wind passing through a cavern, and they shambled forward.

As before, these were what had become of the spiders' victims. They were no more than skin and bones, but they still wore the clothes and equipment they had in life. They were instinctively drawn toward the living—toward the party—and their fumbling hands grasped toward the light.

"There were more ?! We're not the ones who killed you!" Ritz cursed. He smacked one undead with his shield, and when it stumbled, ran it through with his sword.

If undead were reanimated by their own resentment, they generally attacked the foes that killed them. These undead, however, prioritized the warm blood of humans over the cold body of the spider.

That said, these victims had been sucked dry; their bodies were frail. Ritz's blade and Chuck's dagger dispatched them with no difficulty.

"All right, Loren! The big guy's all yours!"

"I think there's a wee gap in difficulty here..."

Ritz made the call as soon as he saw that his party's weapons worked against the undead. Meanwhile, Loren was the only one who could harm the spider. Although Loren thought this was too much responsibility to push onto him, he agreed that it was the right decision.

Not that it made him feel especially cheery.

But he had to do what he had to do. Loren charged. He was about to lower his blade into the spider's belly as it continued spewing web, but the spider whipped around with startling agility. It directed its head at Loren and leapt out of his sword's range, once again suffering no more than a slight wound.

"Bastard!"

Loren launched a follow-up attack, but he was forced to jump away again as the spider sprang into another charge. He could have stood his ground and cut it, given the sharpness of his blade. But even if he did, that wouldn't stop the force of the spider's charge. He would be run over, injured, and possibly even killed.

He naturally chose to avoid the blow. Once Loren dodged out of the way, the spider crashed straight into the opposite wall.

"They're falling again!"

"Damn! There's no end to them!"

Ritz's party took care of the additional undead. There were so many that Loren found himself wondering how many more could possibly be stuck to the ceiling. Ritz's party displayed true competence as they continued dealing with them.

This would go one of two ways: either the spider's stock of undead ran dry, or Ritz ran out of stamina. The only way to break through would be to do something about the damn spider. And so, Loren stepped forward.

"Force!"

Before Loren had reached his mark, Lapis smacked an offensive blessing into the spider. A blast of pure power struck with enough force to dent its abdomen before the next shot of binding could be fired. For a brief moment, the beast was stunned.

Using the opportunity, Loren closed in within striking distance. He used all his strength to slice into the spider's belly, which seemed relatively softer than the other parts. The blade slid smoothly through, carving considerably deeper into

its flesh.

As white and blue fluids spouted from the wound, the spider seemed to be in great pain. It violently thrashed as it attempted to turn toward Loren. Loren kept his distance so he wouldn't be caught in these lashing attacks and lopped off one of its legs. No more charging and dodging.

"Fireball!"

Gula took her shot with an orb of flames. As the spell collided with the writhing spider, a fierce explosion broke out and shook the cavern walls. The spider hadn't been damaged by Fire Bullet, but at this point, the heat was clearly doing something. The explosion only worsened its suffering.

"Did I see a bite mark on that thing?" Koltz asked just before the burst. "Right before the magic hit."

"Of course not, silly old man," Lapis said, oddly monotone. "How could that possibly be so?"

The spider teetered unsteadily from the heat and force, and Loren dove in. He didn't know where its vitals were, but he knew that most things generally died when their heads were crushed.

First, he lopped off another leg so it couldn't charge, then, switching his greatsword to a reverse grip, he stabbed it onto the spider's head. As the blade stuck in deep, he released his grip, pressed his foot to the pommel, and delivered a harsh kick to drive the weapon further in.

The sword was buried all the way to the hilt. The spider thrashed in pain, and the group temporarily retreated to the corridor they'd come from so as not to be caught in its death throes. The surrounding undead were thrown, scattered, and crushed beneath the writhing monster. The party hunkered down in a passage too small for the party to enter and wound up waiting a good while.

"Wow, you really defeated it."

The spider's vitality matched its monstrous size, and it struggled for an age even with its head pierced through. But its movements gradually weakened, and finally it fell on its back, completely still.

They waited a little longer after that before returning to the work area and inspecting the corpse.

“It did a number on this place,” Chuck said.

The spider had torn through the threads it had lain throughout the area. These now decorated its remains like a mountain of garbage.

Even more undead victims had fallen in the monster’s wrath, only to be flattened beneath it. Some were scattered across the ground. Others had been wrapped in the thread, stuck fast to the mangled spider corpse. It was quite an awful scene.

“What do we do now?”

Loren circled around to the spider’s head and retrieved his sword, which glimmered damply with the spider’s bodily fluids. With one flick of the wrist, he managed to shake off most of the excess liquid. The rest he took care of with a cloth.

“All that’s left is to leave the tunnel... Though I doubt it’s a decent sight out there, given the state of things in here.”

“Let’s rest a bit first. These consecutive battles have been rough,” said Chuck.

“I’m in favor. These old bones need some rest.”

Koltz immediately approved Chuck’s proposal, and no one objected. Once Ritz confirmed the choice, Gula pointed at the massive spider corpse.

“Are we taking it apart? We should be able to get a buncha stuff from something that big.”

“Probably not. It’ll be unnecessary baggage.”

“Really? What a waste.”

Gula looked at the spider as though it deserved better. But the job of surveying demon territory took precedence. Even if they collected the spider’s materials, the raw parts would spoil before they returned, and the carapace was too bulky to transport.

Besides, no one wanted to deal with the body, not with all those disgusting

threads and corpse fragments stuck to it. Thus Nym's proposal to leave it saw no objections either.

"Good work, Mr. Loren. I'm glad you weren't injured."

As everyone searched for somewhere to sit or something to lean against, Lapis congratulated Loren. She held out a water canteen and a clean cloth.

He said his thanks, then used the cloth to wipe his face and the canteen to wet his throat. "Demon territory is just ahead, huh."

"Yes, that's right. We'll need to go through the dwarf settlement first."

"Sounds like a pain."

"A pain indeed. But we'll manage, I'm sure."

They stood on the cusp of the domain of demons, who were loathed by the world at large. Lapis spoke of entering it as though they were on an afternoon stroll—it was her home, after all. She had no reason to be concerned about returning to her motherland.

Meanwhile, Gula was an entity who had once been named a "dark god." Perhaps she thought nothing of going toe to toe with demons.

Loren was the only human in his party, and the only one who seemed worried. This left him a bit depressed. But Lapis smiled and insisted it would all be okay. She held out her hands, and he handed back the cloth and canteen. Only then did Loren let out a light sigh.

After the battle, and after a short break, Loren investigated the spider's body.

His party members weren't as enthused and took their rest at a distance, but Loren had a reason to approach. He stabbed the body a few times in random places, making sure it was thoroughly dead, before looking for the spot Gula had struck with her Fireball spell.

Owing to its hard carapace, the spider was slightly scorched on the surface, but it hadn't otherwise taken much damage where the magic collided. There was only one place where its outer shell had been breached. The flames and the explosive force had destroyed its innards from that point.

“That’s clearly a bite mark...”

Anyone who saw it would have guessed it had been left by teeth.

It was clear what had happened, seeing as it had been Gula’s magic, but the others weren’t inclined to take a close look at the spider, and so they had yet to realize.

Even if they did notice the mark, they would be left wondering what could possibly have bitten the spider—a question to which they would receive no answer. Loren figured it would be fine to leave it be. Just in case, he began arbitrarily shaving away bits of the carapace with his sword.

As he worked, he suddenly noticed that a weight had left his right shoulder. He glanced to see that the obsidian spider sticking to him had vanished. In its place was a thread, and following that thread, he found the spider had stuck itself to the huge spider’s head. It was plunging its own head into the gash left by the killing blow.

What’s it doing? Loren wondered, until he abruptly realized that it was eating the dead spider. This made him feel a bit weary.

If possible, he wanted this little guy to wander off and disappear, just like that. But the thread from the obsidian spider’s rear maintained a firm anchor on Loren’s shoulder, telling him that it fully intended to return.

Can I really not flick it off? He wondered. He tugged at the threads, but a bit of strength wasn’t nearly enough to detach it from the surface of his jacket. That got him worried. What would he do if it never came off? For the time being, he continued investigating the large spider.

“Not that I have much to do...” he said, stabbing his sword into one of its legs.

Ritz’s attack had done little to its outer shell, but the same shell had been nothing before Loren’s sword. A light swing from the blade had split it. And, peering into the cross-section, he found exactly what he was expecting and sighed.

Beyond the slit, there was absolutely nothing. The spider was utterly hollow—its innards were nowhere to be seen. After staring into the hollow for a bit longer, Loren’s eyes shifted to Gula, who was resting on the other side of the

work area.

Gula seemed ecstatic about something, but when she saw Loren looking at her, she hurriedly assumed a poker face and turned away. It was obvious enough what had happened here.

“That girl...she ate only the insides.”

Loren didn't know if it had happened during battle or after. Once a Predator took a bite to boost her spell's effectiveness, she'd sent it into the opening and cleanly devoured everything within. As for why she had gone to such trouble...

Gula worried about being found out, or at least she seemed to. Yet she had left this hollow corpse behind, and it was beyond suspicious. Whether she wanted to be outed or not, the problem seemed far more fundamental.

“What do we do about this?”

Ritz's party would immediately pick up on the problem if they even took a glance.

As Loren wrapped up his investigation, the obsidian spider rummaging around the corpse's head climbed back up the thread leading to his shoulder. Once there, it wrapped its thread into a ball and ate it.

Loren looked down at the spider, feeling it had gotten a little heavier. He could tell it didn't feel like leaving anytime soon. “I'm not keeping you as a pet... but you need a name...” he muttered.

The spider on his right shoulder vibrated.

Wait, that reaction... Does he understand human speech? Loren wondered. Then he extinguished those thoughts. Big or small, a spider was just a spider. How could a spider possibly understand humans, let alone respond to them?

Sensing the spider coming to a stop, he looked at it again and hesitantly asked, “You want a name?”

Not like he's going to reply, Loren thought.

But the spider did indeed shake again.

Clenching his jaw before it could hit the floor, Loren put his thoughts in order.

Apparently, some arachnid species could understand human words. He had never even thought about this possibility before, not back when he was a mercenary. But perhaps such things did exist.

The spider vibrated harder, as if urging him on.

When it came to naming, the vibe was important. Loren decided to go with the first thing that came to mind. “Negreto. Neg for short.”

The spider came to a sudden stop. Loren wondered if he didn’t like it, and he began thinking of what else to offer when the spider gave a single shake. It seemed to be a show of acceptance.

Stroking its slick surface with his left hand, Loren said, “Neg it is. I dunno how long you’ll be around, but, well, we’re stuck together for now.”

The spider named Neg was vibrating again.



“Are you done?” Lapis called out, as though she had been waiting for him to finish. Her eyes seemed to be directed at both him and the spider.

“Can this guy, you know, think?” Loren asked her.

“He can. Of course he can.”

She made it sound so obvious, but Loren was thrown for a loop.

“Is that common knowledge?”

“They’re smart enough to understand human words, to a degree. It’s well known around these parts... The dwarves are likely also aware.”

“Is it all right for me to carry him around?”

This spider wasn’t just intelligent—it understood humans. And this was a well-known fact. Loren felt like he had stumbled into a wholly foreign ecosystem that defied the bounds of his common sense, and it was making him increasingly anxious.

“There...shouldn’t be a problem. It’s not like just one of them will bring a nation to its knees.”

“Isn’t that kind of a weird example?”

“Something as small as a town might be in danger, so do be careful.”

“Hey, wait a minute.”

Lapis had said something direly concerning, but Loren’s quest for clarification was cut short by Ritz.

“Can we get moving soon? I know you’re not fully rested, but that should have been a good breather.”

“That ought to be fine. What do you say, Mr. Loren?”

Loren had no choice but to answer. For the time being, he gave up on interrogating Lapis. He did have a nagging feeling that something unspeakably troublesome might happen if he didn’t find the time to ask her later. Then he would regret never having brought it up.

“All good here. We’re near the exit, right?”

“That’s right. Watch out, it could be all spiders there too.”

The spiders filling the tunnel had presumably come from the outside. If one followed this train of thought, the only conclusion was that there was an incredibly high chance that the exit to demon territory was a spider hunting ground.

“Let’s hope there aren’t any more of the huge ones.”

“Give me a break,” Ritz muttered. “You just saw how useless our weapons were.”

“You don’t have any countermeasures?” Loren asked, a little taken aback by the weakness in Ritz’s voice. It was surprising to hear that a silver-rank adventurer thought his options were so grim, but he also found it pretty reckless to head into demon territory without a single backup plan.

“Well, it’s not like I’m totally stumped. I have ways to work around issues, and I’ve got my own trump card.”

“It would be rude of me to ask about it, I guess.”

“Naturally. It’s a trump card because you keep it a secret,” Ritz replied as he began walking. “If you’re aiming any higher than iron, you should work on getting one of your own.”

Ritz went on to explain that all adventurers above silver kept an ace or two up their sleeves. Information about these secret techniques was a matter of life and death, so they were kept highly secret and hardly ever advertised, let alone demonstrated.

“It’s the same as showing a good hand. Hide it all the way to the end—If you’re gonna use it, make sure it’s to dispose of your opponent. No harm in keeping that in mind, right?”

“I’ll take it as a friendly warning from a veteran,” Loren replied as he considered the merits of having a secret card at his disposal.

His party contained a demon and a dark god, as well as the power of a Lifeless King. Loren saw himself as the weakest of the lot—the member with the least combat strength. He needed to prepare something of his own to whip out,

something he could use without relying on others, even if it was just the once.

«*What's the use of getting even stronger than you are, Mister? Are you trying to transcend the human condition? I don't recommend it. Not as someone who did just that.*»

Loren felt his heart rate go up at Scena's words. *Did she read my mind?* he wondered, but she giggled.

«*You're just easy to read in general.*»

Am I that obvious? Loren cocked his head. But he was soon brought back to reality by Chuck, who had gone to scout ahead.

Chapter 7:

Investigation to Collusion

“HHEY, TAKE A LOOK at this.”

Chuck’s voice prompted the rest of the party to join him in his hiding place. He was only a few paces from the tunnel’s entrance, just beyond the point illuminated by the light from the outside world. Anyone holding a lantern extinguished it and peeked in the direction the thief was pointing.

If things on the demon end of the tunnel were roughly similar to the things on the human side, they should have been looking at a dwarf settlement. There were certainly dwellings that someone must once have lived in.

But that wouldn’t warrant a summons from Chuck, and the party soon understood what needed their attention.

“There’s...no one,” Ritz muttered.

There were no traces of life anywhere among the structures.

However, this was to be expected. The spiders of the cave had presumably attacked this settlement to propagate. In that case, they would have expected to find spiders and silk nests in their

place. But the settlement before them bore no trace of such things. It simply existed, quiet in its solitude.

“Maybe...the spiders went elsewhere after they killed the last dwarf?” Ritz suggested.

Lapis shook her head. “Then the threads would remain.”

As long as the spiders were anywhere in the vicinity, even in passing, they would have left vestiges in the form of their webs. But none of them could detect those classic signs of arachnid life in this vacant landscape.

“Maybe the spiders never came here at all,” Chuck timidly proposed, though he clearly didn’t believe himself. Everyone looked at him coldly, and he shrunk

back.

“No matter how ya think about it, those spiders must’ve passed through here, right? So why’s it so peaceful?” Gula asked, ignoring Chuck.

Of course, no one had anything like an answer.

“No use waiting around here,” said Ritz, after an awkward beat of silence. “How about we do a bit of digging?” He had determined their dawdling was useless if no one had either answers or hypotheses. “If no one’s around, it should be a quick search. If you find someone, just grab ’em and ask what happened.”

“Let’s hope someone’s still around to ask,” Loren added.

Everyone exchanged looks, some wearing helpless smiles. They all agreed it would take some investigating to sort out what had happened.

Thus, they left the grand tunnel and set foot in what had once been a dwarf settlement. All too soon, their search reached a standstill.

“There’s nothing left,” said Loren.

Indeed, the settlement was thoroughly devoid of anything. Here and there, they found traces of battle or bloodstains, but none of the corpses that came with such happenstance, and no traces of spiders either. On top of this, all the goods and supplies had been so completely stripped away that they had nothing in the way of leads.

The only noteworthy finds were traces of an open-air fire. The settlement ground was paved in fine stone, though, and even Chuck couldn’t tell what exactly it had been used for.

If they found anything at all that could cast light on the situation, they could have begun making further deductions from there. But alas, even after only a short time spent investigating, they concluded it pointless.

“It’s good to know when to call it quits. We can’t twiddle our thumbs here forever,” Ritz said, staring up at the sky.

The investigation was over, and by the time everyone had gathered, the sky was turning red. It would only grow darker from here. Time spent in the

settlement would cut into the time they had to spend on their primary objective.

“I feel for you, Diggs. But we didn’t come here to find out why the residents disappeared.”

“It’s understandable...”

Diggs didn’t seem satisfied, but he understood he couldn’t put Ritz’s or Loren’s party up to a job that wasn’t even a guild quest. He didn’t object to Ritz ending the investigation.

“If we’re not investigating, let’s get out of this creepy place already.”

“No objections here.”

Night would soon be upon them, and the settlement’s dwellings weren’t the worst place to set up camp. But considering how the residents had vanished, it wasn’t exactly the most reassuring either.

“See ya, then. We’ll be splitting up here. We’ll wait for three days from tomorrow morning. As long as you’re back here by then, we’ll head back together. That work for you?”

“Yeah, it’s not like we’re gonna do anything crazy. We’ll just stick around the area.”

“Sounds like a plan. Here’s a bit of advice: If you want to camp near here, don’t worry about lighting a fire. The demons don’t come all the way out this far, and even if they see it, they won’t go out of their way to check. Those guys like to take it easy.”

If that’s true, that’s a huge load off my chest, Loren thought as he looked to Lapis.

“Neither demons nor humans have so much free time on their hands,” Lapis said, not seeming to notice Loren’s gaze.

Even so, Loren took this as her answer to his question. If a demon was saying that, he wasn’t going to argue.

“Then we’re off. We don’t have too much time.”

“Take care. Stay safe.”

“We’ll meet again, Loren.”

“We owe you another one.”

Ritz’s party said their goodbyes and started off toward the heart of the land of demons. Presumably, they were doing precisely what Ritz had said—they would go a bit further to collect information before returning. Loren watched them disappear into the forest at the edge of the settlement.

“So what do we do from here?” Loren turned to Lapis now that the other party was out of sight.

Loren had evaded Ritz’s question, claiming they would remain at the edge of demon territory. Their true objective was Lapis’s home, where they might uncover more of the truth underlying Loren’s sword. Only Lapis knew how to get there.

“Well, let’s see. Shall we go to my place, then? At least, that’s what I’d like to say. But apologies, I have some other minor business to attend to,” Lapis looked sincerely apologetic.

Though Loren had a vague idea of what she was about to say, he asked just in case. “What business is that?”

“I must confirm what happened here. A moment ago, Mr. Ritz said that no demon would care about what happens on the outskirts of their territory. But likewise, no demons would neglect to investigate such an oddity after bearing witness to it first-hand.”

Loren and Ritz were both coming here as foreigners. Whatever happened here had nothing to do with them, and they had no special need to worry about it. But this was Lapis’s homeland, and for her, this curious phenomenon was not so easily overlooked.

“The dwarves helped me a great deal when I was leaving the country. At the very least, I need to know what happened to them.”

“How earnest of you. Guess I gotta tag along, then.”

After all, Loren couldn’t make it to her home without her. Obviously, if Lapis

was investigating, he needed to stick around.

Seemingly picking up on this fact, Lapis scratched her head with a sullen expression. Something had just occurred to her. Investigating an abnormality came naturally to a demon, but it also meant dragging Loren and Gula along, whether they wanted in or not.

“You know, let’s just forget about it,” said Lapis. “I know I’m the one who brought it up, but let’s just pretend we didn’t see anything...” She didn’t want to drag them into potential danger for no good reason and was about to rescind her statement when Gula interrupted.

“I don’t care either way.”

The sky was redder now than before, a sign that night was just ahead. Gula pointed up at this sky, and Loren and Lapis, after looking up at it, turned to her, wondering what she meant.

“It’s gonna get dark soon. If we’re campin’ anyway, we can camp here, right? Whatever’s responsible for this place might come back at night. If nothing happens, we can probably assume that this place isn’t so dangerous after all.”

“That...may be so. But I can’t lead you two into danger,” Lapis said, apprehensive.

Gula grinned. Such a malicious smile it was that Loren braced himself and Lapis backed away. But Gula quickly reined in her menacing aura and waved her hand. “Kidding, kidding. You just say the darnedest things sometimes, Lapis. So what was that about danger?”

Lapis couldn’t repeat herself after facing the dark god’s smile. But even if this wasn’t an issue for Gula, there was one more person she was concerned about.

“But...we have Mr. Loren too.”

“Then we just have to look after him, you and me. Anyway, it’ll take a lot to take down Loren, right?” Gula said.

Lapis glanced at the man in question.

I knew it. As far as they’re concerned, I must look quite a bit more fragile, Loren thought. But he accepted this as a simple fact. “I’ll try not to hold you

back.”

That was the most he could promise.

Lapis thought for a while but finally lifted her face. “In that case... My apologies, but I must ask you to spend the night here with me.”

Loren and Gula nodded in unison.

And so the night came. Lapis confirmed Ritz’s claim that a fire at the edge of demon territory wouldn’t draw the interest of any demons.

As she put it, the demons were well aware that other races infiltrated their territory to collect information. Though they had countermeasures ready to deploy if these humans drew too close to their homes, they were otherwise uninterested. At most, they would think, *Those folks are here to mess around again*. None of them had the curiosity or interest to actually go out and pick a fight with the adventurers.

“Human information gathering merely involves determining whether the demons plan to cross the mountains and attack.”

The adventurers weren’t doing much at all, and killing them would only add to the demons’ bad reputation. So, there was no benefit in doing so. Once Lapis explained this, Loren began to find his own excess of caution to be somewhat idiotic.

However, there was no guarantee that they were dealing with demons this time around. Not wanting to draw any undue attention, they prepared dinner without using a flame and concealed themselves in a corner of the settlement. They would spend the night keeping watch to see if anything strange wandered through.

“I want to eat something cooked.”

“Yeah, yeah. Later,” Loren assured Gula.

They didn’t even set up a tent, only taking turns resting in their sleeping bags.

The oddity unfolded halfway through the night, when the moon was high in the sky. Loren and Lapis were on watch together, and Gula was snoring soundly

in her bag.

They were camping in the shadows of a structure on the outskirts of the settlement. There shouldn't have been anyone else around, but they sensed the approach of something living. Lapis picked up on it on her own, and Loren was alerted by Scena.

"Something's coming. From the east. Somewhere between twenty and thirty entities."

«Mister. Twenty-six from the settlement's east side.»

The night belongs to the Lifeless King, Loren thought as he signaled for Lapis to wake Gula. He shifted his hiding spot so he could observe the east side.

Humanoid figures entered the settlement by climbing over the fence surrounding it. They were only slightly larger than humans. Loren watched, trying to ascertain their intentions, when each took a tool in hand and suddenly began demolishing the nearest structures.

It was too sudden. Loren blinked, wondering if the moonlight had shown him some fantasy. But a second look and a third didn't change what the figures were doing. They worked too quietly, too deftly. Several of these figures shouldered the scrap material to leave, only for new figures to take their place.

"What are they doing...?"

"Erasing the evidence, perhaps?"

Before he knew it, Lapis was right behind him. She cocked her head as she observed the same sights.

"Why would they do that?"

"To erase all trace of their misdeeds. For instance, say the dwarves perished in an unfortunate 'accident'—now they meticulously remove anything that suggests such an event transpired."

"You're not speaking from experience, are you?"

"I would never make such a blunder."

Lapis was always quick to come up with these nefarious schemes. Was that

her demon side speaking? She denied it, for what it was worth, so he didn't press. He wasn't going to ask questions he didn't want answered.

Gula's drowsy voice came from behind. "What's all this? Those huge, black goblins...?"

"Huge, black...goblins? You can tell what color they are?"

The party hadn't prepared a lantern. They had only the moonlight to see by, and Loren could only tell that vaguely humanoid entities were at work. Gula's eyes, however, saw their specific form and even their color. Once again, Loren was impressed by the abilities of a dark god. But more curious than that were the details she described.

"Haven't we heard about something like that before?"

"Don't ask me. Anyway, they have black skin, and they're goblins," said Gula.

Loren fished through his memories. He'd met large, black goblins somewhere before...

Lapis sounded a bit amazed that he couldn't remember. "Aren't you talking about our first job together, Mr. Loren?"

"Huh? Oh, that."

It had been Loren's first quest as an adventurer.

His help had been enlisted by another party. They'd set off to exterminate some goblins, but he'd then witnessed the utter annihilation of that party. Through saving Lapis—the last surviving member—he'd begun working with her. In the middle of that job, they'd found themselves in some ruins of the ancient kingdom, where they had come across large goblins with pitch-black skin.

They were smarter than the ordinary breed. More powerful, more skilled. They had been formidable foes, able to give Ritz's silver-rank party a run for their money.

"But those ruins were sealed off and busted, right?"

By the end of it, the facility making those experimentally strengthened goblins had been destroyed by Loren's hand. It had been left beyond repair and sealed

by the adventurers' guild. Even if the guild's seal was broken, the facilities were still unusable. It should have been impossible to produce these goblins again.

"There's no guarantee that it was the only production facility. Also, if the records were extracted, it would be simple enough to reproduce the process elsewhere."

"Is it that easy...?"

"In the first place, those ruins... They were supposed to be dormant. Someone must have entered them before Mr. Ritz's party ever arrived."

Dormant ruins would have remained dormant—unless someone activated them. This sounded obvious enough, but Loren wished she had pointed it out earlier.

"I thought it was a trivial detail," said Lapis, entirely guiltless.

"You were wrong," Loren retorted.

Then he received a warning—a word from Scena. *«Mister! You're surrounded!»*

"What?!"

Loren had been on his guard all this whole time, yet he hadn't picked up any sign of approach. Shocked by Scena's words, he tried to stand—only to find his right ankle grasped by a translucent hand that had sprouted from the ground.

«Don't touch him!»

Scena's will caused the hand to burst into nothingness, but another hand sprouted in its place. It flickered and swayed as it stretched toward Loren and his companions. Then another appeared, and one more. It wasn't just a few either—there were more with every second. Before they knew it, they were wholly surrounded by these transparent arms.

"So it's ghosts, then!"

Ghosts had no true presence. They gave off a strange air, but Loren had been too preoccupied with the goblins to notice.

"You can eat ghosts, but that doesn't get rid of them for good," Gula

grumbled as she waved a hand. The countless hands sprouting from the ground cleanly vanished like some sort of bad joke.

Loren was appalled by the anticlimax of it all, but he focused and turned to Lapis and Gula. “We’re running. They probably noticed us.”

“So it seems,” Lapis agreed.

She and Gula followed Loren’s orders and attempted to make a swift escape. But something had noticed their presence, and it took measures before they could react. A fresh batch of black goblins cut off their escape route, each monster wielding a massive club.

“What a pain!”

Despite the considerable number of goblins ahead, Loren charged straight at them without dropping his speed. He drew the sword from his back and sliced through any that blocked his path.

Both those that took a swing and those that tried to block him swiftly realized the futility of their actions. Their bodies quivered at the cold of the white blade passing through their flesh. In the next instant, they were but lumps of meat.

The other goblins faltered at their comrades’ swift defeat, and Gula sent out her Predators to indiscriminately devour them.

With so many allies defeated with so little difficulty, any normal goblin would have lost the will to fight. But the black monsters stepped over the blood and guts of their fallen comrades and continued the attack.

“They’re not scared at all!”

“I’m sure they’ve been trained well.”

With a wave of Lapis’s slender hands, the goblins surrounding her collapsed, their heads turned around several times too many. Lapis paid no heed to the heads that had been wrenched off or the blood that sprayed in their wake. She raced between the goblins’ ranks, taking her place beside Loren, who was exchanging blows with an even larger force.

Beyond the settlement was a deep forest. Once they made it there, the goblins wouldn’t be able to freely swing their clubs, and they would struggle to

navigate the dense woods with their large physiques. This would slow the chase.

“I’ll open the way!” Gula shouted, pointing her palms at one corner of the wall of goblin flesh. That action alone saw the goblins before her vanish, consumed.

Loren and his party tried to flee through this obliterated fraction of the encirclement before it was filled—but someone stood in their path.

“Sever, Caliburns.”

Something came at them—something Loren could only describe as a flash of light.

Through Scena’s shared vision, Loren saw this flash slice through Gula’s Predator that had been devouring goblins only seconds before. It was neatly halved by the light, which carved through the ground as it raced towards them.

A chill ran through Loren. Something so powerful that it could cut a dark god’s authority was headed straight for them. His body instinctively began self-strengthening, and he evoked his berserker state. It was that old feeling of something *clicking* into place—and he charged.

Loren met this flash with the strongest attack he could muster.

There was the sound of shattering. The flash scattered from the point where it made contact with Loren’s greatsword. Shards of shattered light left cuts across Loren’s body as he instantly rushed in the direction of whoever had fired the attack.

A somewhat impressed voice came from that same direction: “Oh? You blocked that one?”

Loren didn’t know how often the voice’s owner could use that attack, but he did know it would be dangerous to let his foe get off another shot. His simultaneous strengthening and berserker rage had let Loren face the dark god of lust, and he mercilessly hammered this same strength into the figure beyond the light.

His white greatsword could cut through stone like it was nothing. The swing,

powered with all Loren's strength, reached speeds imperceivable to the naked eye. However, the sensation he felt in his hands was not that of cutting through flesh. He felt the shock of being blocked by something rigid.

"I don't know what hole you crawled out of, but you seem to be a decent swordsman."

Loren's blade had been caught by another—a longsword the figure held in one hand. Loren stared at their locked blades in disbelief.

The figure beyond the longsword cracked a smile.

Loren clenched his hilt with both hands, trying to drive even more force into his weapon.

The fact that his opponent had stopped his attack with one hand—

The fact that his opponent seemed to be *enjoying* this—

Even in his berserk state, Loren felt like a cold blade had been thrust into his heart.

Locked against his foe's blade, Loren got a closer look at his appearance.

It was a man around the same height as Loren. His build was slightly slimmer, but seeing as he'd single-handedly blocked a reinforced strike, he was plainly stronger than he appeared.

He wore black metal armor, forged to match the lines of his body, and a similarly black mantle. His narrow eyes were black as well, and his features had an air that was less cold and more cruel. But it was his long black hair, untouched by the slightest curl, that left the strongest impression.

It seemed the longsword was his only weapon. He did not carry a shield.

"What's wrong? Is that it?"

Despite his loose stance, the man didn't waver, no matter how hard Loren pushed against his sword. Worse, Loren could feel himself being pushed back, though only slightly. He gritted his teeth.

Growing ever more detestably acquainted with the sensation of his boots scraping against the ground, Loren poured even more strength into his stance

so as not to lose any more ground.

Then he noticed the man laughing.

“Sever, Caliburns.”

By the time Loren knew the flash was coming again, he didn’t have the time to avoid it.

In that case—

Loren summoned his resolve and strove to contain the attack with his greatsword. As if reacting to his will, his own blade let off a similar white flash.



“Hm?!”

For a moment, it sounded like the man had let out a gasp of surprise, but that was the least of Loren’s worries. He found himself unable to brace for the impact that assailed his entire body. In the next instant, Loren flew backward.

At the same time, the man was shot back as well. A large gap now lay between them.

While the man recovered his stance and immediately held his sword at the ready, Loren’s mind began scrambling for ways to escape while suffering as little damage as possible. The short exchange had clearly demonstrated that this man was out of his league.

He had used his self-strengthening, and he had unleashed his inner strength. The moment these both proved futile, Loren had no more tricks up his sleeve. Being so offhandedly repelled was almost a calming experience—his berserk state had been dispelled. This was a spot of good luck.

If it hadn’t, he wouldn’t have been able to run away.

The power’s one thing, but the real trouble is that he only needs a short incantation to activate that flash, Loren thought. His mysterious white greatsword could somehow disperse the attack, but he didn’t know how long it could keep that up.

In any case, Loren had no intentions of enduring an attack that had torn through Gula’s dark god authority. If he didn’t have countermeasures, running was his only option.

“What’s on your mind? Do you even have time to think?”

Loren hadn’t let his guard down, but in his moment of thought, the man slashed at him. It was a combination of many blows, swift yet strong. Loren barely fended them off, but this small exchange made clear that this man was his superior not only in terms of power but speed. Loren had been forced onto the defensive.

It was only a matter of time until he was cut. But even if Loren knew this, he had no means of escaping his predicament.

“Loren! Jump!” Gula shouted from behind.

A misplaced jump in a duel would give one’s enemy time to strengthen their stance or to pursue. It would only worsen his chances. But if Gula was going out of her way to tell him to do it, she had a plan. Without a second thought, Loren took a powerful leap backward.

In this instant, the majority of the black goblins surrounding them vanished. Before Loren could fully process what was happening, the man was chasing him, and Gula’s Predator dove in front of him with its mouth open wide.

The Predators were usually invisible and incorporeal, so it was a surprise that she had manifested this one in a physical form. But the man had already proven he was able to cut through it. It wouldn’t even serve to slow him.

But the moment the man was about to swing his sword, a vast sea of masticated blood and flesh poured forth from the Predator’s wide, gaping mouth, and drowned the man headfirst.

“How about that!” Gula crowed, clenching her fist.

Lapis looked at her with tired eyes. “How nasty... To think you’d throw up all the goblins you ate...” She sighed.

It was only as Loren landed that he understood. Gula had known her Predator authority wouldn’t work, so she had manifested it as a smokescreen. Their foe hadn’t anticipated this. He had been preparing for an attack, and so failed to respond to the sudden torrent.

“It’s nothing but harassment, and dreadful at that,” said Lapis.

“But it was effective.”

Given the crude nature of the attack, it was hard to perceive its danger. But it was a surprising amount of flesh. Even Loren would have flown into a panic if it was dumped on him. It would take time to recover from something like that, not to mention that the fat that came with the remains would stick fast to his armor and weapons, making it difficult to attack from his new position.

“Start running already. We can’t deal with him.”

“Was he...strong?” Lapis asked.

Loren nodded without a moment's hesitation. "He was. I was no match."

The man had proved his caliber by single-handedly taking Loren's twice-reinforced strike. His longsword, which neither chipped nor broke against the greatsword, was also worth considering. Additionally, his sword skills surpassed Loren's own, and he could consecutively fire those powerful flashes. The mere thought of fighting him head-on took the wind out of Loren. Running away was the only right call.

As for what had happened to the dwarven settlement, the specifics were unknown, but that man had clearly done something. Any further investigation at present would put their lives at risk.

"I see. Let's run, Ms. Gula."

Lapis was on board with Loren's proposal. She called out to Gula, who rushed over with the smile of a child who had succeeded in their mischief.

"Running away, right? Well, hop to it, then."

"Would he be a difficult opponent for you too, Ms. Gula?"

"Who knows? I might have a chance if I took it seriously—not that I want to. He's stronger than Loren, he is. I guess there are all sorts of humans out there."

The man had yet to emerge from his flesh burial, but there was no telling when he would attack. They couldn't keep up this conversation for long, so they swiftly made off.

They weren't heading in any particular direction. They simply ran to distance themselves from the scene. But they hadn't gone far when a bright light illuminated the ground from behind them. Another one of those flashes was coming.

"He's already back up?!"

"That wretch!"

Loren swung his blade as he turned, clashing with the flash. He was overpowered by its force and shoved back yet again. Even so, the white blade successfully dispersed the attack. Loren grimaced; his hands were numb after the impact.

“You think you can just run away after what you’ve done?!”

The long-haired man’s face was warped with rage, his body stained in filth, as he brandished his longsword and gave chase. Despite his heavy armor, he hounded them at considerable speed.

“He’s fast! Catching up!”

“He’s livid, he is.”

“Well, who could blame him?”

Anyone would be angry if someone vomited right on their head. This anger had to be multiplied by an order of the fact that it had been goblin flesh. The man’s fury was understandable.

Loren glanced back as he desperately raced into the forest, and in the meager light he could make out the man’s terrible state. He didn’t feel like apologizing, but even if he did, there was no stopping now.

“Sever, Caliburns!”

Again, the flash shot out from behind.

This time the party didn’t spare the time to block, instead dodging to one side. The massive, radiant burst of light raced past them, annihilating any trees in its straight path.

Loren’s body was rocked by the shock waves and dirt it kicked up. He looked over his shoulder to see the man already preparing the next one.

“That bastard plays dirty! How can he keep firing those at no cost?!”

“Even if I wanted to eat them, he slices straight through my authority.”

“That must be quite a powerful magic weapon. Though the set is incomplete, it seems to pair with his armor, providing various beneficial enchantments,” Lapis said, appraising him with a series of brief glances.

The man’s equipment seemed to power unbelievable effects, even if the details were yet to be determined. And the set wasn’t even complete.

“He’s probably missing the shield and helmet.”

“What does it matter?! He’s already strong enough!”

Another flash careened toward them. Perhaps because the man was shooting while running, his aim wasn't especially focused. The attack passed nearby, though its residual waves still jolted them. The impact nearly tripped Lapis, but Loren scooped her up under his arm.

"Goddamnit! One's gonna hit eventually!"

"Fine, very well. Shall I put in a bit of effort?"

Lapis slipped out of Loren's grasp, flipped herself up onto his shoulders, and perched there, facing backward.

That's some fine acrobatics when we're running for our lives! Loren and Gula thought. They had no idea what she was even trying to do.

"Nameless pursuer, I would recommend not chasing us any further," Lapis called.

"Silence! You know what you've done! Don't think you'll get out of this in one piece!"

"I meant that as a warning."

The man wouldn't hear it. Lapis's shoulders drooped a touch, but honestly, Loren couldn't tell what part of that was supposed to be a warning.

"Then you leave me no choice. I shall have to force you off the stage."

"Try me," the man declared and finally stood his ground.

He didn't give up on us, not after that exchange, Loren thought, glancing over his shoulder. His face stiffened when he saw the man grip his sword with both hands, holding it high overhead.

At the same time, Lapis pointed her palm at him from atop Loren's shoulder.

"By the king's name, I invoke your exalted form," the man cried. "Send forth your all-encompassing flux. Onward, Caliburns!"

"Awaken, o power that fills these lands," said Lapis. "By the name of your king, vanquish the insolent one."

Something *happened*. That was all Loren understood. He didn't know what it was. As for what he sensed—

First, there was a white light behind him, so intense that it would have burned his eyes. Then, there was an impact so great that it would have torn his body apart.

Gula latched onto him, wailing about something or another. As Lapis sat on his shoulder, she gently rested her hand on Loren's head.

It was still. So still that Loren wondered if his eardrums had ruptured. As he watched the scenery become bathed in white light, he felt a strange, floaty sensation. Then he was out cold.

Epilogue:

From One Destination to Another Job

AS HE DROWSED, Loren felt he had been in this situation before.

A memory. An immense vortex of mana washed over him, and he could do nothing but cry. He couldn't tell where the memory was coming from, but it was strangely clear that it *had* happened, once upon a time.

Mind you, Loren didn't know the last time he had cried. It had to have been a long, long time ago. In this hazy vision, someone was right beside him, comforting him all the way.

There was a pain in his chest. He reached out for salvation. Loren's palm was enveloped in warmth, and this sense of relief drained the strength from his body.

"Oh dear, how bold of you."

"Mother? Precisely what are you doing there? Please explain yourself in a way I can understand."

"I am assessing the man my daughter brought in."

"I don't even know how to respond to that."

This conversation between two women forcibly dragged Loren back to reality. When he opened his heavy eyelids, the first thing he saw was a bone-chilling expression on Lapis's face.

Then he saw a woman in an extravagant dress, who was, for some reason, straddling his body.

The woman's long black hair had been swept behind her head without any particular styling. Her features somewhat resembled Lapis's, and judging by the conversation, he figured her for Lapis's mother. Appearance-wise, she didn't look old enough to have a daughter Lapis's age.

However, the woman's eyes were a shockingly vivid purple. There was no

doubt that she belonged to demon-kind.

“Have I made you mad? I’m sorry for causing a fuss.”

“Mother, please crawl off of Mr. Loren already. That seat is reserved for me.”



“Is it, now?” the woman asked as she obediently dismounted.

Loren let out a relieved sigh as the weight left him. But then for some reason, Lapis came to occupy the same spot, rendering it difficult to breathe.

“You can sleep a bit longer, Mr. Loren.”

“Not happening. Get off,” Loren urged, lightly tapping her knees. Despite the displeased look on her face, Lapis slowly removed herself.

That was when Loren finally realized that he was lying on a bed. His clothes hadn’t been stripped off, but his boots and his jacket had been removed and neatly placed by the wall. Neg was clinging to the jacket, still insisting that it was his home.

Another survey of his surroundings allowed Loren to piece together that he was in a bedroom. A bright light streamed in through the window.

“I’m...alive, right? Where are we?”

Thinking back to the moment before he lost consciousness, it wasn’t out of the question that he might be, in fact, dead. The impact had been unspeakably intense.

The radiant flash fired by the man in black armor had collided with some sort of power Lapis invoked. As for the result, Loren half-wanted to know and half-wanted nothing to do with it.

“You’re alive,” said Lapis. “This is my home. Does that explain it?”

“Your home?” Loren parroted.

Lapis pointed him toward the smiling woman sitting next to her.

If Loren accepted this premise, then he was sleeping in a spare bedroom in Lapis’s home. The other woman was also therefore Lapis’s mother, just as she had said.

“How much time has passed?” he asked.

“We just made it through the night,” Lapis replied.

It hadn’t been long, then. Loren tried to sit up, but both Lapis and the woman stopped him.

“You need to rest a bit more. You’ve recovered, but you were in quite a terrible state.”

“I’m so sorry about our Lapis,” said the woman. “She never considers the consequences.”

For a moment, he wondered what they were talking about. Then he realized Lapis’s mother was referring to the power her daughter had used against the man in black armor, apologizing for the fact that he had been knocked out by Lapis’s antics.

“I had no other options at the time.”

“If that’s the case, Lapis, you’ve grown far less than I’d hoped.”

The woman giggled and Lapis glared at her through gritted teeth.

Is it all right for me to get involved here? Loren wondered. He cleared his throat.

“Oh yes, let me introduce you. This is Mom.” Whatever she’d taken his throat-clearing to mean, Lapis grabbed the woman by the shoulder and used her free hand to gesture at her face.

Loren lightly nodded.

The woman in the dress courteously lowered her head. “My name is Judie Paimonia. Though I have another surname after that.”

“Loren. Former mercenary, current adventurer. I’m something like your daughter’s partner.”

It was common courtesy to return an introduction. Loren gave the bare minimum information, and as Judie nodded, Lapis looked a bit pleased.

“The word ‘partner’ has quite a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” she said.

“Glad you like it. So, where’s Gula?”

Loren remembered her jumping onto him before he lost consciousness. If Loren was alive, it was hard to imagine Gula was any worse off. It was a bit concerning that she wasn’t around.

“She’s resting in another room. It seems she tired herself out, using all that

power.”

According to Lapis, the moment before Loren lost consciousness, Gula had deployed a barrier to protect them. But the clash had been stronger than she anticipated, and even with the barrier, they had been hit by a formidable shock wave. Though she wasn’t really injured, Gula was down from the overuse of her authority and her magic.

“Are we close to our last location?”

“No, quite far away. My people came to carry you off after we noticed the impact from afar.”

“My people”? Who exactly are you? Loren wondered. Judie’s attire suggested she hailed from some high-status family. Perhaps it was normal to have a few servants at her beck and call.

But something was bugging Loren. He and Gula had been knocked out, but Lapis seemed fine, even though she was the one who’d caused it.

“For now, I guess we’ve reached our destination,” he said.

“Indeed, we have,” Lapis replied.

Meanwhile, behind her, Judie slowly drew Loren’s blade. She lifted it with one hand and gazed at it with nostalgic eyes.

“You came to ask about this blade, yes? I never imagined Lapis would run off with it. I looked for it all over the place.” She lightly swung it about with nothing more than a flick of her wrist.

Loren, who had wielded the weapon until now, couldn’t believe his eyes. Even if the blade had lost its outer casing, it was still massive. A woman of her stature shouldn’t have been able to lift it with one hand, let alone swing it without moving anything but her wrist. Yet this was undeniably happening.

“This is the sword I used to wield. What was it called again? Ah, it was a bit of my youthful indiscretion.”

Don’t swing that thing around for such a stupid reason, Loren thought. But he didn’t know how she would react if he blurted out something like that, and so held his tongue.

More importantly, they had finally pinned down the sword's origin. They had thus achieved what they had set out to do.

"Ah, that takes me back," said Judie. "It's from my demon lord days."

"Oi, hold up."

"You're being misleading, Mother. After all, you are still very much a demon lord."

"Hey, now..."

An unbelievable term had just been flung out in casual conversation. Lapis and Judie spoke as if they were exchanging trivial banter, but Loren simply couldn't let this slip past him.

"Demon lord?! Your mom's the *demon lord*?!"

"Yes. Well, they're not that rare."

"To be more precise, I am *one of* the demon lords tasked with defending the western territory."

"There's still the great demon king above her. Our house is *kind of* distinguished... But there are quite a few demon lords, you know."

As Lapis explained it, a demon lord was a lord of demons—but just as humans had multiple nations, each ruled by a lord of their own, there were also multiple political powers among demon-kind that functioned similarly.

Lapis's mother, Judie, served as the lord defending the western territory. She was the strongest member of her party, so she had been given the title of "demon lord."

"It is the great demon king who stands above all demons."

"Anyway, this is one of my personal belongings, so I'll be taking it back," said Judie. "At least...that's what I'd like to say. But there are certain circumstances at hand. Depending on how things pan out, I might lend it to you," she concluded as she balanced the blade against her shoulder.

Ignoring Loren's confusion, she went on, "This quest has to do with that man you met before you arrived. Your reward shall be Fiamma Unghia, the weapon

of a demon lord. Not a bad deal, don't you think?"

Whether it was good or bad had yet to be seen. Loren didn't know anything about the mission entailed. However, when he saw Lapis shaking her head, he understood that turning down Judie simply wasn't an option.

Thus did Loren surrender, staring up at the ceiling and letting out a deep sigh.

Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

THE OTHER DAY, a certain female swordswoman cried her heart out to me.

I didn't know what she was talking about at first. Even when I lent her my ear, she bawled and wailed like she didn't care who was watching. So I got a bottle of the strong stuff and tried asking for her story once she was dead drunk. As I heard it, this swordswoman couldn't beat her party's female priest and had lost her position in the party.

I pressed her for the specifics. The priest in question served the god of knowledge. Not only did she seem to know anything and everything, she also carried a mace into battle and used it to smite her foes. Her blessings rescued her comrades from the brink of death, and she could use several simple magic spells as well.

What's more, she was beautiful. The swordswoman couldn't find a single means by which to best the priest, and she was at an utter loss.

Of course, I wanted to ask, *What fairy tale did that priest crawl out of?* In any case, I consoled the girl with some basic platitudes and returned her to her inn before I went searching for that female priest to give her a stern talking to.

I hammered the point home. I pried it out and hammered it back in so many times, until I was certain the same thing would never happen again.

I understand why one of our kind might want to cut loose after reaching the outside world, but taking it that far does none of us any good. What are you going to do if the rest of the world starts to suspect us? Good grief!

Now then, even I was at a loss this time. It all started with that greatsword Mr. Loren has been using, but given its origin, I knew we'd need to go nosing about to learn anything about it...

I thought Mr. Loren would be just fine, but he seemed rather reluctant. In

fact, it was a shock when he tried to run away in the dead of night. Although that was an appropriate reaction for an ordinary human, and I suppose I acknowledge that even his tolerance has limits.

I can't undo the exploits of my ancestors, so I had to concede his point.

Anyway, I managed to persuade him somehow or another, and we headed off to a desert region that seemingly had nothing to do with the mountains. Truth be told, there happens to be a ruin from the ancient kingdom beneath that desert. Ever since I stumbled upon it, I've been secretly using it as a base.

I don't really know the specifics. By my understanding, it used to be a relay station for a long-distance transport system called a "railway." Now it's buried in sand.

Over time, other similar locations fell into disuse, and now the rails only go to the station by the mountain range.

Falling through quicksand is the only way to get in. It was no issue for me, or Ms. Dark God Gula, but Mr. Loren had his difficulties. A part of me considered doing a few things to him while he was coincidentally unconscious, but Ms. Gula foiled these plots. I suppose I shouldn't have expected a gluttonous dark god to have any consideration for a maiden's heart.

Using the railway, it wasn't long until we were at the base of the mountains. The rails originally stretched across the entire continent, but with the fall of the ancient kingdom, only a few remain.

I was honestly shocked to find such facilities spanned the continent. At times, I wonder how a country of such magnitude could disappear while leaving hardly any traces. But one need only look at the reality of the situation to know that it had to be possible, somehow. But something doesn't seem right.

Anyway, I had to concentrate on the job laid out before me.

Outside of the railway station was a dwarven settlement. The mountains surrounding demon territory are abundant in veins of rare ore, and so the region is renowned among their race.

A dwarf's love of metals can take them to incredible places. There are spots they won't give up even if their living conditions are terrible, and even if it's terribly dangerous—even if it makes them neighbors with the most hated race on the continent.

Thanks to this, the mountains are filled with tunnels they've dug. It has become a dwarf-made labyrinth, and some routes have even been forgotten by the dwarves who dug them. A dwarf's guidance is absolutely essential to making it through.

I don't know whether this is true, but there's rumor of a group who got lost in the vast tunnel network who've established a settlement somewhere within it. Another rumor has it that the sprawling paths are so convoluted that even the ghosts of lost souls can't find their way out.

Thus, we attempted to negotiate with the dwarves for a guide, but there was trouble afoot. Apparently, those who entered the tunnels had stopped coming out. Just as we were at a dead end, we were reunited with Mr. Ritz's silver-ranked party, who we'd become acquainted with on a previous job.

Concluding we would be fine with our reinforcements, the head dwarf took up the task.

Incidentally, the path we were set to follow was one Mr. Ritz's party often used, and they hoped to resolve any issues that might have taken up residence in the tunnel. I certainly wasn't going to do their work for free. I don't think I was wrong to ask for payment.

The dwarves' grand tunnel was massive.

Dwarves themselves aren't especially tall, yet the ceiling was so high that Mr. Loren could swing his sword. In fact, it was far higher than that. I couldn't blame Mr. Loren for being shocked, but he acted a bit strange the moment he set foot inside.

He seemed bothered by something, but before I could ask what, we were attacked by an army of spiders.

Some might think, *What's the big deal? They're just bugs.* However, bugs can

be a terrible threat once they grow that large, or when they come in swarms. In this instance, it was both. Running was our only option.

Defeating one spider was simple enough. But when one was defeated, ten took its place. We were all doomed to become their fodder.

What's more, in the tunnels, the spiders were faster than us. As we panicked over what to do, Ms. Gula claimed to have an idea.

She was true to her word.

How should I put this...? Regardless of her true nature, she still *looks* like a woman. I believe she should cultivate a bit more modesty, or concern for her appearance. Logically speaking.

Spiders have underdeveloped respiratory systems, so merely spreading a bit of noxious gas incapacitated them. Knowing this, Gula used her authority to spread massive amounts of, ah, gas.

To preserve Ms. Gula's honor, I shall not elaborate.

I am a woman as well, and I hesitate to put pen to paper on such matters. However, to those who are imagining the gaseous substance produced from the lower body of some animals and humans, I here assert that it was something else.

Ms. Gula's weapons come in the form of *mouths*. Thus, in terms of emission, what she emitted was closer to a so-called "belch," if a far more powerful version.

Although crude, it was better than anyone having to risk their life. As such, I shall consider it acceptable, though I don't know what to think about being saved by Gula's belching.

This is just a bit of trivia, but some people may wonder why we didn't burn the massive amounts of spider thread. Generally speaking, spider webs do not burn. Sometimes you meet people who claim otherwise, but they've mistaken the burning rubbish and dust stuck to the web for the web itself. The thread itself does not catch.

You can burn *through* the thread, so fire can still be effective when it's stuck

to you. However, the flame won't spread along it. Anyone who wants to burn a spider's nest should probably stop while they're ahead.

Back to the matter at hand.

Deeper in the tunnels, we ran into the undead remains of the spiders' victims as well as freshly born nymphs. Nothing I would be comfortable describing.

Along the way, Mr. Loren got a spider stuck to his shoulder. It's called an obsidian spider—palm-sized arachnids with black exteriors that shine like obsidian stone. I don't know why, but they have a habit of sticking to anyone they deem powerful. They are smart and strong themselves.

The sole woman of Mr. Ritz's party, the elf hunter Ms. Nym, seemed to doubt their strength, but she was a tad mistaken. By the way, Mr. Loren later named the little fellow Neg.

Right, about Mr. Neg's species. They are incredibly calm and patient. They rarely ever attack, and they won't be riled even if you pick on them. Being as small as they are, they don't yield much material, so adventurers largely leave them alone. That is why they aren't seen as much of a threat.

If you actually anger an obsidian spider, they have the power to instantly level an entire village, or even a small town.

Perhaps that isn't much, all things considered. I just want to note that they are not to be trifled with.

The spider stuck to Mr. Loren as it recognized him as a powerful individual. It also, I'll note, targeted Mr. Loren rather than me or Ms. Gula. What a formidable arachnid it is.

This and that occurred, and we at last approached the exit, where we came across the head honcho of all the other spiders, which was considerably more massive than the rest.

This was the evolved form of a dire spider. A terribly troublesome foe.

By troublesome, I mean it was troublesome to deal with without arousing the suspicions of Mr. Ritz's party. It wasn't too much trouble in terms of the actual combat, though my priestly role becomes a bit of a nuisance when other people

are watching. I mean, whenever that's the case, I'm unable to fight alongside Mr. Loren on the front lines.

We managed to beat the enormous spider regardless, but it wasn't Mr. Loren who saved the day so much as our hungry dark god and her endless appetite.

We managed to escape the grand tunnel, somehow or another. Beyond lay the empty husk of a dwarven settlement.

We had expected this. That fearsomely large beast had taken up residence near the exit to demon territory, so it was only natural to see its influence. The unexpected part was the complete lack of any trace of spiders in the settlement.

There were faint traces of battle, so *something* had undoubtedly happened. However, our investigations turned up nothing. In any other land, I would have ended it there, but this was demon territory. I couldn't just leave it at that.

We parted ways with Mr. Ritz and his companions, after which I asked Mr. Loren if he would help me discern what had happened to the dwarves. Mr. Ritz's silver-ranked party would go on to conduct a survey of demon territory. I could only pray that they didn't attract the attention of any of my more curious kin.

I felt partially apologetic, and partially happy to see them go.

For the time being, we elected to spend the night in the uninhabited settlement. We wanted to see if anything odd appeared, and appear it did. We were met by the same black-bodied goblins we first encountered in those ancient kingdom ruins.

These are not naturally occurring lifeforms, so I'm certain someone must have made them. I found myself wondering who would do such a thing as I watched them dismantle the settlement—when suddenly, Mr. Loren was attacked by ghosts.

Though we dealt with those easily enough, we ended up alerting whoever was controlling the ghosts and goblins, and the black goblins surrounded us. However, Mr. Loren had a different weapon than he had in our prior encounter. Somewhat-reinforced goblins were no match for me either.

We also had Ms. Gula's authority on hand, and I didn't consider our foes much of a threat. The problem lay in their numbers—there seemed to be no end to them, and it wouldn't have been wise to remain where we were. Our best bet was to break through the surrounding monsters.

That was when *he* appeared. His long black hair was knotted behind his head, and I felt nothing but coldness from his narrow black eyes.

His skin was pale. His armor and mantle were pitch-black. My first impression was that he was a boring two-toned fellow, yet surprisingly, this man could block a swing from Mr. Loren, even when he was using his strengthening and had fallen into his rampage state.

There were two surprises, to be exact.

First, he could match Mr. Loren's enhanced physical might with a single hand.

Second, he possessed a sword that could match the formidable edge of Mr. Loren's blade, which effortlessly slices through stone.

On closer inspection, both his sword and his armor were imbued with powerful enhancements. Ms. Gula's authority was ineffective against them, and he could consecutively fire destructive blasts at seemingly no cost. I thought this might prove a bit difficult for Mr. Loren.

And so, I decided to pitch in.

The land of demons is a bit different from everywhere else.

It is a land deeply steeped in the power of its presiding king, a power that influences every facet of existence within the realm. Borrowing this power, I can exercise spellcraft that only demons can wield in demon territory.

I can't cast it often, and it's not like any old demon could use it either. Even I can only do it thanks to my lineage. But putting that aside, the way the black swordsman invoked, "the king's name," was rather strange. Do the human territories also possess a king who can be invoked in such a way?

The shock wave that resulted from our powers colliding shook the air and earth. I watched our surroundings tremble under its might, all the while thinking that the situation had grown awfully curious.

And Ms. Gula, was that really the best way to surprise him...? I can't stick up for you on that one.

I'll keep today's tale at that. Anything more would be redundant. Like how we carried Mr. Loren back to my home, and how I found my own mother on top of him. Or about how my mother is an active demon lord, and I am the daughter of that demon lord. Or how Loren's greatsword was originally a demon lord's weapon and whatnot.

It's all superfluous.

As it should be.

No, wait, is it really all right to end it here?

Looks like it is.

When my mother took a peek at my notebook, she smiled and told me, "Is there something else you must commit to paper? If not, just keep it short and sweet."

"I have nothing else to commit," I said. She would accept no other answer.

And so, the rest will have to wait.

That is all.



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